Shannahan, Chris


Chris Shannahan, lecturer in Religion and Theology at the University of Manchester in the UK, has been involved as a Methodist Minister in inner-city development projects for 16 years. He recently launched the Metropolitan Religion Study group at the University of Binghamton in the US, and strongly advocates interdisciplinary and cross-cultural urban theologies that are attuned to today’s superdiverse and fluid urban world (see also his first book, Voices from the Borderland, Routledge, 2010).

In this study, Shannahan offers his own urban theology. Compelled by his own inner-city experience, he surveys the development and features of community organising (CO) in both the US and the UK, reflects on these developments from various aspects of social and political theory, and evaluates CO through the lens of a reimagined liberation theology. An epilogue offers 20 statements as a charter for his theology of community organisation.

The first section is a helpful overview (for the uninitiated) of CO as a particular form of social activism in the US and the UK. In today’s post-ideological societies, CO has gained renewed strength through faith organisations that have demonstrated renewed social relevance — contrary to the expectations of the (now) less popular secularisation thesis. In contrast with other social movements, CO aims for long-term strategic change with a multiple-issue agenda; it empowers people to speak and act for themselves in permanent networks of action; and it develops existing social tensions to bring about social change. Self-interest is considered the key motivational factor for engaging people in such social change, but Shannahan challenges this assumption frequently.

In the next section, Shannahan presents a convincing case for situating community organising in the broader arena of social and political theory, even though most CO practitioners prefer practice over theory. This section contains very insightful digests of topics such as a comparison of CO with the rise and nature of social movements; and an incisive discussion of a new politics of difference that mediates between identity politics (which ‘freezes’ difference as an essentialist ethnic, social or religious identity) and uncritical multiculturalism (which reduces difference to irrelevance, while usually advocating the dominant majority culture). Instead, this new politics of difference recognises that difference is multidimensional (age, gender, ethnicity and race, religion, education, etc.) and is now perceived as sociologically normative, earning the label ‘superdiversity’. In addition, views on civil society (as associational life, as
the ‘good’ society, and as the public sphere) and on social and religious capital (as networks of trust and reciprocity) are reviewed.

Perhaps the most exciting section — at least, for this reviewer — is the third, in which Shannahan offers a theological account of co. He reaffirms his commitment to a contextual (and not a systematic) theology, following Bevans’ praxis model. For this purpose, he reimagines liberation theology, shifting from an exclusive focus on the oppression of poverty to the complex, multifaceted dimensions of oppression in modern societies. Shannahan changes the focus on self-interest as key motivation to a robust ethic of agape love, which avoids political naiveté by being committed to the divine bias for the oppressed. Further in-depth discussions concern the deconstruction of dominance (Beckford on ‘dubbing’); a new, inclusive catholicity (Schreiter); third-space theology (Baker); and a new, radical hospitality dedicated to Christian cosmopolitanism (Bretherton).

This leads to three core principles: (1) prioritising insignificance and (2) liberative reversals (just as Jesus placed the marginalised centre stage) (3) in a hermeneutic of liberative difference, which does not theorise diversity away in constructions of hybridity, nor freeze differences in essentialised identities; but which critiques all such forms of reductionism in a dialogical pursuit of difference where truth and justice matter. Only, we ask, whose truth? And whose justice?

The three dogmas of the imago Dei (to live respectfully in community), incarnation (to seek unity through solidarity) and shalom (to aim for holistic well-being) support and resource a theology of co.

Finally, Shannahan advocates a subversive model of discipleship, with an Ignatian spirituality of deep listening and reimagining Scripture to sustain the social activist and prevent burnout.

This monograph offers an exemplary practical theological reflection, using the pastoral cycle to think through the experience of community organising and how it links with social and political theory, as well as with theological concepts. The book incites to action, but refrains from presenting a standard recipe — which would contradict the contextualised nature of Shannahan’s theology.

Although the case of community organising is perhaps still unfamiliar in continental Europe, its social-scientific and theological analyses are very significant for current discussions of the missional or emerging church, many expressions of which focus on diaconal presence and service, often with only superficial theological reflection. Shannahan has done us a great service in providing a well-founded theological proposal to sustain such religious and social action.