BOOK REVIEW

Dreamcare: A Theology of Youth, Spirit, and Vocation

Dreamcare: A Theology of Youth, Spirit, and Vocation is the latest work from educator David White, and I have looked forward to its publication for both professional and personal reasons. His book Practicing Discernment with Youth has long been a staple in youth ministry courses I have taught, and students appreciate White’s distinctive approach to inviting youth into Christian discipleship – an approach rooted in animating their capacities to participate in the healing of the world. Dreamcare extends that commitment by addressing head-on the pervasive sense of purposelessness that cripples so many youth from living into this call to discipleship.

Drawing on extensive social scientific research, White argues that adolescence and young adulthood have lost developmental distinctiveness and purpose. Fewer young people engage in the social markers and rites of passage that historically have denoted maturation – yet as Erik Erikson has observed, the primary task of adolescence is achieving identity and discovering that to which we want to commit ourselves. Stalled economies provide few opportunities for meaningful work, marriage and childbearing are delayed, and participation in the common good is, well, uncommon. “Simply put,” he writes, “young adults generally feel little obligation to participate in any cause larger than themselves and their immediate social networks.” (3) This “directionless drift” manifests itself in both the depression and psychological fragility of so many young people and the impoverishment of a world unable to benefit from their passion and contribution to the common good.

Where other writers might address the problem by psychologizing the dilemma and recommending “strategies” and “programs” to solve it, White moves in an entirely different direction: practicing holy listening to the voices of young people and placing them alongside the voices of the Christian story – scripture and theologians – as they imagine and dream what their lives can be. He uses dream as “a metaphor to characterize the process by which young people construct visions of the lives for which they were meant.” (xvi) And indeed it is a word with ancient and powerful roots, according to the Christian story; dreams are a means by which the Spirit beckons as the individual’s gifts and passions, God’s call, and a new world are knitted together into being. We all live in cultures that raise up certain values and social roles rather than others, and the Christian story stands squarely as a critique of many of those roles and values. This is the heart of
vocation – “how we attend to God’s distinctive call upon our lives amidst … often contrary cultural demands.” And the nurture of this vocation requires that youth be surrounded by communities of discourse, attentive adults, rigorous conversation, space for experimentation, and the opportunity to enact good on behalf of another. This isn’t a list of activities for a youth group; this summarizes a life of Christian commitment.

The volume begins by drawing on research by Peter Benson of the Search Institute on the “sparks of purpose” present in all young people and how adults and communities can nurture them. White suggests a well-developed pneumatology as a means for understanding these “sparks” and locating them within a larger theological narrative. In the next chapter, he turns to a theological exploration of the Holy Spirit, drawing significantly on the work of Jurgen Moltmann and arguing that without attending to the work of the Spirit, the church is left without “a powerful narrative resource by which young people might grasp the significance of their emerging purposes and participate more consciously with the Spirit.” (21)

The next four chapters constitute the core of White’s project. Drawing on research interviews conducted during the Youth Theological Initiative summer program, he introduces us to four young people, each of whom provides a window into one of the core features of Christian purpose: desire, compassion, joy, and responsibility. He also puts their stories in conversation with a major theologian to see what emerges: Serena’s narrative of desire is matched to Thomas Aquinas, Don’s joy is put alongside Jürgen Moltmann, Craig’s pursuit of compassion speaks with Jon Sobrino, and Lyle’s call to responsibility meets Walter Wink. White concludes the volume by suggesting practices to nurture these Spirit-driven “sparks” and suggests the implications of this project for congregational youth ministry. As is typical of his work, he stops short of prescribing a model of ministry yet underscores ways of engaging youth that have both a well-established theological rationale and history for animating their senses of purpose and meaning.

Dreamcare has a few shortcomings worth naming. Granted, it is written within a North American cultural context, although readers might find that the restlessness and longing of these youth resonate across boundaries. As such, White’s project invites readers to become attuned to the values and worldview of the dominant culture to see where the salvific vision of the Christian story might be supported or subverted in young people.

Readers will also likely notice that three of the interviewees are young men and chafe at the fact that the only young woman is the one with ostensibly the least altruistic professional dreams. There is no avoiding this critique. Additionally, White is intentionally nonspecific about the race and ethnicity of the interviewees, but the impact of socioeconomic factors is woven into