

Review Essay:***Homelessness, Liberation Theology and Faith Based Organisations***

Laura Stivers (2011)

***Disrupting Homelessness:
Alternative Christian Approaches***

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, pp.187, £11.99.

David Nixon (2013)

***Stories from the Street:
A Theology of Homelessness***

Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, pp.202, £19.99.

Laura Stivers is Professor of Ethics and Director of the Graduate Humanities Programme at the Dominican University of California. David Nixon is an ordained Anglican priest and Dean of Studies of the South West [of England] Ministerial Training Course and sometime Research Fellow and Teaching Assistant in the School of Education at Exeter University. In these publications, Stivers and Nixon both exhibit a profound anxiety about the way religion engages with homelessness and draw upon liberation theology as the inspiration for a critique of established ecclesiastical dealings with homelessness in their respective countries.

Liberation theology emerged in the 1970s and 1980s in Latin America. It sought a reinterpretation of the gospels to re-orientate Christians (particularly the Catholic Church, though other denominations were involved) away from support for established hierarchies to champion the poor – a concern with social justice overshadowing the prevailing doctrine that salvation is the primary purpose of religion. This challenge to traditional beliefs, together with the conjoining of liberation theology with elements of Marxism, incurred the bitter opposition of the papacy (as well as the CIA, see Fox (2012)). Pope John Paul II with Cardinal Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI), then 'Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith', declared

liberation theology a 'singular heresy' and, in a sustained campaign, muzzled and disciplined its most prominent clerical proponents thereby effectively sabotaging and thwarting its impact and influence.

Liberation theology endures today, as a more ecumenical movement, in a muted and truncated form in some Latin American countries and has been adopted by black, queer and feminist groups in North America and to a lesser extent elsewhere. In the UK and Europe it has long been a topic of academic interest and intermittently a guide to action among some campaigning groups and communities (Streetlytes UK; Smith, 1997; Howson, 2011; Altman, 2009). Notwithstanding several (overly) confident predictions of its demise (e.g. Lynch, 1994), liberation theology has survived and, indeed, is presently undergoing something of a revival; in the words of one observer, it has 'come in from the cold' (McDonagh, 2014; see also Rocca, 2013). The basis for this revival has much to do with *inter alia* the continuing secularisation of western society, the rise of militant Islam and the socially selective austerity effects of the 'great depression', all of which challenge the role and relevance of established Christian churches. The recent election of Pope Francis as head of the Catholic Church is perhaps symptomatic of this change in outlook. Pope Francis – formerly Archbishop of Buenos Aires – has not embraced liberation theology and is unlikely to do so (indeed he has a history of fierce opposition), but he has welcomed and endorsed some of its former clerical proponents¹ and seems sympathetic to liberation theology's social (if not political) aims. It is in this context that the significance of the work of Stivers and Nixon is manifest.

Laura Stivers begins by setting out her 'ethical method'. Referencing the work of Traci West, the black, feminist and Christian ethicist, Stivers encapsulates her approach in the concept of 'prophetic disruption', which calls for the dismantling of social policies and practices that exploit and exclude disadvantaged people and confronts ideologies that justify such exploitation and marginalisation. Stivers poses several explicit questions (p. 20): 'What would it mean to make power analysis central to the issue of homelessness and housing? How are power, privilege, and social domination connected to homelessness and where do we see intersecting oppressions (e.g. race, gender, and class) at work?'

In seeking answers, Stivers first provides a brief history of homelessness in the USA, identifying the economic policies that make it difficult for low-income people to access adequate housing. This is followed by a critique of those ideologies that, in seeking solutions to homelessness, focus on transforming the behaviour and the spiritual mind-set of the poor rather than on structural solutions that challenge

¹ In September 2011 Pope Francis met with Dominican Father Gustavo Gutierrez, one of the founders and proponents of Liberation Theology in Latin America.

social domination and inequality in American society. With these propositions in mind, Stivers goes on to provide a critical examination of two common Christian responses to homelessness. The first is the 'charity approach', which typically focuses on the provision of temporary shelter, basic food and (often rudimentary) support services. Spurred by a commitment to the concepts of 'agape' and 'caritas', the charity approach accounts for the bulk of Christian churches' involvement with homelessness. The second response Stivers labels a 'more structural' approach. This augments the charity approach by, for example, assisting homeless people to move on to permanent, affordable accommodation. These two approaches are illustrated (in chapters 4, 5 and 6) through a critical exploration of the *modus operandi* of two representative FBOs (faith based organisations): the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions (the charity approach) and Habitat for Humanity International (the 'more structural' approach).

While readily acknowledging that these approaches tackle some of the immediate effects of homelessness and provide a valuable service, Stivers maintains that they fail to address the fundamental systemic causes of homelessness in that they reinforce ideological assumptions such as 'individualism' (e.g. instilling discipline and a work ethic), 'blaming the victim' as well as 'idyllic conceptions of home ownership'. According to Stivers' assessment, 'neither of these responses challenges the status quo of privilege and power, and in fact, by adopting dominant ideologies, they actually support the status quo' (p.106).

Stivers' alternative approach of 'prophetic disruption' challenges 'theological interpretations that support domination and oppression' (p.113) and calls for a widening of horizons beyond the local and beyond the immediate needs of individual homeless people. For Stivers, prophetic disruption 'would critique our capitalist system and would be wary of simply offering alternatives without challenging... the social and economic policies that marginalise and exploit people and would support policies that redistribute wealth and power more evenly' (p.117). Furthermore, prophetic disruption asserts that 'the multiple ways people are exploited and marginalised must be addressed simultaneously... simply providing affordable housing without at the same time organising for workers' rights, for equitable and excellent education systems, or against institutional racism will not automatically support people to have flourishing lives' (p.120).

Stivers' proposals are ambitious. She advocates the building of a 'social movement' to end homelessness (pp.17-19; 127-133): 'there must be a social movement that keeps the momentum of prophetic disruption going, that structurally addresses the root causes... and does not settle for short term efforts' (p.17). For Stivers, such an undertaking would move beyond a focus on housing policy to address all social and economic policies that create poverty and inequality. She further insists that a

social movement based on prophetic disruption is 'less about reaching some ultimate finite goal than about participating in the hopeful process of becoming a more just and compassionate society' (p.19).²

In the final two chapters, Stivers develops aspects of the scope of her proposed social movement on homelessness. She starts by reiterating the reasons for establishing such a movement: 'All of our ideals of a just and compassionate society will be just that unless we have the political will and power to institute social change' (p.127). The picture she conjures is of church congregations choosing areas of concern 'while working in coalitions... and in solidarity with the people most affected' (p.120). These areas of concern include: challenging the ideology of home-ownership; pressuring developers and bankers to act responsibly; campaigning for change in local, state and federal tax regimes and budget priorities; and agitating for educational reform and the provision of proper health care support. Stivers recognises that such activities may well be beyond the comfort zone of many Christians. However, using scriptural support from Moses and the Hebrew prophets among others, she suggests that while '[c]oercive methods can feel un-Christian to many church people... justice clearly requires both resistance and advocacy'; she goes on, however, to reassure that such 'resistance and advocacy... can be peaceful and non-violent' (p.131).

Stivers thus conceives of her proposed social movement as a form of group action pulling together individuals and organisations in a common focus on specific political and social issues in order to bring about fundamental social change. Such coalitions and groupings require organisation. Stivers identifies two national role models in this context: PICO (People Improving Communities through Organising) and the IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation). For Stivers '[t]heir distinctive emphasis on organising people from the ground up is a useful approach for responding to the issues that most affect the poor and homeless' (p.141). It is not entirely clear whether Stivers is suggesting that church congregations emulate such organisations by forming an independent homelessness social movement or that they should join with these organisations, which already have a focus on affordable housing provision, to enhance their homelessness credentials and interests. Indeed, her conclusion that 'while there are many approaches, the most important thing is to take action' (p.146) rather lacks focus and is a disappointingly vague end to an important and innovative book.

'Stories from the Street' is David Nixon's PhD thesis, a fact that comes through in its specialised and academic tone. Whereas Stivers' book is very much a primer, adopting a didactic tone with each chapter followed by a series of questions 'for

² Stivers employs the word 'prophetic' not so much in the sense of foretelling the future but of 'creating a vision' and 'identifying potentialities'.

discussion', Nixon's is less accessible, at least for non-theologians. Sub-titled 'A Theology of Homelessness', the reader has to work hard to discern the message amid the biblical and scriptural references and engagements; indeed, one reviewer (with Christian beliefs) accused Nixon of excessive 'theological musings'.

The basis of Nixon's book is his own experience of 'urban ministry'; especially his interaction with homeless people and their 'stories', and indeed much of the text is given over to the narratives of homeless people themselves. Nixon uses these accounts to explore what he calls a 'theology of story', whereby homeless experiences are set alongside biblical and scriptural texts in what is described as a 'dialogue of mutual illumination and critique' (p.ix). For the less theologically inclined, and indeed I suspect for many with or without religious beliefs, this is all rather impenetrable – in this respect at least Nixon's book is definitively for the theological cognoscenti. A further theme running through the book relates to the methodology of research, with introspective reflections on ethics and procedures, especially that of 'participatory methods' and the relationship between 'the writer and those written about' (p.146). This is a work of postmodern scholarship where the analysis of text and language seems to be as important as the analysis of practice. Such topics may well be important for a PhD thesis but are perhaps less relevant to a general audience concerned with homelessness and the role of religion in that process.

Nevertheless, having dealt with the theological detail, Nixon comes to an interesting conclusion – one that mirrors and reinforces that of Stivers. Michael Langrish (until recently Bishop of Exeter), in a foreword to the book, summarises this well: 'listening to the voices of homeless men and women is to be pointed towards an exploration and understanding of a larger paradigm which provides a frame of reference for listening to the experiences of a wide range of people... who increasingly *have a sense of their lives being shaped by a space, or spaces, which they have to occupy, but to which they do not belong*' (p.ix, emphasis added). In this way, issues of homelessness are set in the wider social context of a theological critique of capitalism and its impact on individual lives, especially those who are vulnerable and marginalised.

Having dealt with some methodological and ethical issues in the first few chapters, Nixon – mirroring Stivers in the context of the USA – embarks on a brief history of UK homeless legislation up to the 2008 financial crisis and the formation of the present coalition government. Nixon concludes his historical evaluation with the observation that homelessness is a 'by-product of... privatisation, free trade and deregulation' and that '[p]olicies on housing and homelessness are choices and therefore ideologically and politically motivated' (p.57). Nixon then works through these sentiments with an examination of what he labels 'Theologies of Place and

Space' (pp.58-60) and 'Theologies of Inequality' (pp.61-65). In these two sections – the latter of which explicitly picks up on the arguments of liberation theology – the problematic obscuring of the social message with the minutiae of theological 'musings' is well illustrated, for the general reader at least. It is clear, however, from the multiple references to liberation theology throughout the book, and especially in the early introduction of the topic (pp.9-13), that this perspective provides the overarching 'ethos' for Nixon's work. But even in this introduction – and certainly later on when he moves to a specific consideration of liberation theology and homelessness (chapter 11) – the obsession with scripture tends to overshadow the social and political message.

Nixon's overriding concern is to demonstrate the relevance of 'story' – the narratives of homeless people's experience. For him – if I am interpreting correctly – such narratives more often than not parallel biblical accounts and they thereby effectively reflect the 'word of God'. The lack of attention to these 'stories' is, in Nixon's view, a 'significant flaw' (p.58) in the agenda around homelessness, especially in the attempts to formulate policy. This 'flaw', it seems, also extends to the Church of England's dealings with homelessness (see pp.154-63). However, it has proved rather difficult – despite several readings – to clearly determine Nixon's views of the church's role in this respect, for he swings hot and cold and at one point changes his mind, admitting to 'some revision of the argument advanced earlier' (p.154). The obfuscating theological shadow that hangs over Nixon's book, together with these frailties of argument construction and presentation (which include some problematic use of commas), detract from what at first glance promises to be an important and enlightening analysis of the connections between homelessness and religion.

Reflecting their shared ethos, Nixon references Stivers appreciatively on several occasions. Both call on and share a predilection for liberation theology and equally embrace its prophetic and disruptive proclivities, yet their emphasis is rather different. Nixon's focus is principally on demonstrating and illuminating the prophetic voices of homeless and excluded people in guiding understanding and policy objectives; indeed, he finishes his book with the exhortation: '[l]istening informs our theology and social policy' (p.184). Stivers is more engaged with liberation theology's organisational message and is persuaded by the potential of social movements to bring about fundamental social change. However, Stivers does recognise the importance of 'story' and its prophetic quality (p.9-11) and, while Nixon has no indexed reference to 'social movements', in writing about Stivers' work he approvingly uses the term and in his brief Epilogue (pp.183-84) references the 2011 'Occupy' movement in London.

Both authors are firmly placed within a reviving radical tradition of Christianity (Duchrow, 2011) and both books are, in their own way, a ‘call to action’ (though Stivers provides the better signposts). Yet, there are some interesting and curious absences. There is, for instance, no hint of a reference to Marx – curious because of the strong association between Marxist thought and liberation theology in its Latin American origins; this reflects, of course, the rather more timid modern-day form of liberation theology espoused by both Stivers and Nixon. And, curiously for books that propose major changes in outlook and activity, there is no direct reference to the church’s conservative opposition to liberation theology or how this is to be overcome, or indeed how to bring on board those who regard ‘charity’ (reputedly the highest of the three theological virtues) as sufficient (cf. Bowpitt *et al.*, 2013 and Lancione, 2014). Similarly, in advocating the creation of a social movement, the problems of interfaith and interdenominational differences and conflicts receive no consideration. Additionally and perhaps most disappointingly, there is no significant reference to the wider literature and history of social movements. While there are indeed passing comments in Stivers to historic examples, the vitality and experience of present day secular social movements (both PICO and IAF are faith-based), which have similar objectives to those proposed by Stivers, are ignored. For all their challenge to ingrained church attitudes and behaviours, Stivers and Nixon are themselves still seemingly trapped in a faith bubble that inhibits the breadth of their thinking and proposals. Beyond the church gates there is world of social movements which could provide positive role models and fruitful alliances (see Cox and Gunvald Nilsen, 2014).

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