

Blurred Worlds – Spirituality and Diversity in the 21st century City

Shannahan, C

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Blurring the Boundaries: Social Exclusion and Spirituality on an Urban Estate

Introduction

Like many other similar urban housing estates Bromford is regularly vilified by a sensationalist tabloid media, stigmatised by vote-hungry politicians, objectified by largely disengaged academics and neglected by most Christian churches. Over the last two years I have discovered just how misleading this dominant narrative is as I have worked alongside unemployed young men from Bromford exploring the impact that social exclusion has on the ways in which they think and talk about truth, identity, meaning and spirituality. Against the odds countless creative people in the neighbourhood are striving to build an inclusive and flourishing community in the face of neglect, deep seated social exclusion, stratospheric levels of unemployment and persistent institutional neglect. Bromford is just four miles from the gleaming regenerated centre of Birmingham but is, to all intents and purposes, an edge community – peripheral and insignificant in the eyes of many of those with power and the thousands who regularly pass the community by on the 11 bus. In this article I ask how a resistance to institutional blindness and the persistence of physical and existential boundaries can give rise to new insights about spirituality in secularised and socially excluded urban communities. I will suggest that a commitment to incarnational mission demands such an open and attentive listening if the Church is to follow Jesus beyond guarded borders into the fluid life of the city in the twenty-first century. Open and attentive listening to the testimony of socially excluded young men living can help the Church to uncover and understand the subversive spiritualities on the borderland estates that ring cities across the UK that are emerging beyond the confines of organised religion.

Being in Bromford

A gifted young rap musician from Bromford who goes by the name of Tek9 raps, *'I'm from Bromford – they call it the slum.'*¹ The Bromford estate is just four miles from the glistening regenerated city centre of Birmingham but those who shop in the gleaming cathedral like Bullring and Needful Things on the Bromford inhabit different worlds which rarely ever meet. Built in the late 1960s on the 'pack them in close' planner's philosophy Bromford is amongst the 2% most multiply deprived neighbourhoods in England and Wales in relation to income and education and amongst the 10% most deprived in relation to employment, health and crime.² April 2012 figures revealed that the area had the second highest level of unemployment in the UK – almost 40% of 16-24 year old young men.³ In the summer of 2010 Bromford was misleadingly labelled one of Britain's 'most workshy estates' in a provocative 2010 article in The Daily Mail.⁴

Bromford, like many other comparable urban housing estates, is out of sight. Hemmed in by the Birmingham to London railway, the M6 motorway, a canal and an overgrown area known locally as 'the wasteland', there is just one road leading onto the estate, effectively making the neighbourhood into a two mile long cul-de-sac. Served by just one bus and with low levels of car ownership the young men whom I have got to know in Bromford can see the glimmering lights of The Fort shopping centre. Just over half a mile away the promise of HMV, Game and Nandos remain out of reach. Even the local Tesco supermarket is two miles and two buses away making shopping for healthy food a serious

¹ See 'What's Goin' On These Days?' at <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?v=1465576530199>.

² Web site

<http://www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/LeadTableView.do?a=7&b=293447&c=B36+8SL&d=141&e=10&g=371324&i=1001x1003x1004&m=0&r=0&s=1302878794984&enc=1&dsFamilyId=2307> accessed 15 April 2011.

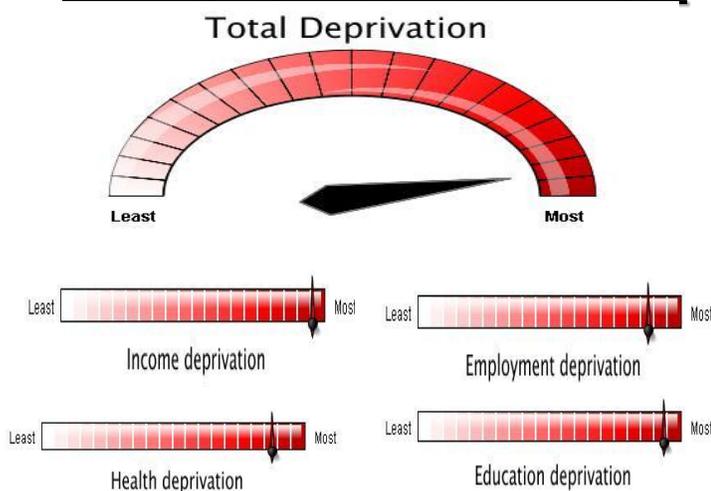
³ Web Site <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/nov/17/unemployment-and-employment-statistics-economics#data> accessed 20 June 2012 and House of Commons Library, *Unemployment by Constituency, April 2012*, Research Paper 12/7, 18 April 2012. In terms of youth unemployment in 2012 this is mapped across the UK at Web Site

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/interactive/2011/nov/16/youth-unemployment-map> accessed 20 June 2012.

⁴ Web site <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1345766/Britains-workshy-community-Cottsmeadow-Estate-Birmingham.html?ito=feeds-newsxml>

problem, unless someone in the family owns a car. The estate was built with exclusively residential terms in mind. The planners and the politicians, it seems, appeared to be blind to the notion that residents might want somewhere other than their homes or the stair-wells to meet and talk. Such institutional blindness gave rise to an estate where the only green spaces were accompanied by ‘no ball games’ signs and a children’s play-area that clings to the fringes of the estate, away from where most people live. There is a dearth of public community buildings (just a small and under-resourced neighbourhood centre and the well-used but small youth centre ‘The Hub’). On the edge of the estate there is a Roman Catholic church and an Anglican/United Reformed Church Local Ecumenical Project which works closely with the faith-based Worth Unlimited youth organisation that has been working in Bromford for ten years.⁵ However the only religious building on the estate is a small independent evangelical church whose congregation commutes to worship and which has little significant engagement with the wider community. The small, mostly Muslim, Somalian community travel two miles to pray as there is no Mosque on the estate.

Indices of Deprivation 2010 -Bromford



⁵ Web site <http://www.worthunlimited.co.uk> accessed 10 January 2013.

Living on the edge – not so ‘NEET’

From the summer of 2010 to the spring of 2012 my work as a Research Fellow in Urban Theology at the University of Birmingham revolved around the two days (and one evening) I spent every week on the Bromford estate. Working alongside detached youth workers from the Worth Unlimited youth organisation I got to know many of the young men who live in Bromford. The NEET acronym accurately describes most of the young men whom I have got to know.⁶ From a purely factual perspective they are Not in Employment, Education or Training. The term, however, is more than a description; it is a moral judgement and the twenty-first century inheritor of such pejorative descriptors as ‘underclass’ and ‘Status Zer0’. The 2010 House of Commons Education Committee report recognised that the term has been imposed on unemployed young adults and that, ‘...its use as a noun to refer to a young person can be pejorative and stigmatising.’⁷ In spite of this NEET terminology has become a dominant metaphor for ‘moral decline’ within much UK media discourse.⁸

‘NEET’ discourse is informed by wider debates about social exclusion. Within months of coming to office in 1997 the Labour government established the ‘Social Exclusion Unit’ which defined social exclusion as ‘...a short-hand term for what can happen when people or areas suffer from a combination of linked problems such as unemployment, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime, bad health and family breakdown.’⁹ Glen Loury argues that such exclusion should not be reduced to economic poverty for it also encompasses, ‘...the dissolution of social bonds.’¹⁰ In a similar manner

⁶ The acronym ‘NEET’ stands for Not in Employment, Education or Training’. In November 2011 there were 1,162,000 16-24 year olds in the UK who were ‘NEET’, the highest figure since records began in 1992. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-15870240> and <http://www.cbi.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2011/11/cbi-responds-to-third-quarter-neet-figures/>, accessed 2 December 2011.

⁷ House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee. 24 March, 2010. Young people not in education, employment or training. London: House of Commons, 9.

⁸ See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-389799/Teen-drifters-cost-taxpayers-20billion.html#ixzz1JngFz67E>, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/6439923/Quarter-of-care-children-end-up-as-neets.html>, and <http://www.bedfordshire-news.co.uk/News/Nursery-neets-struggle-at-school-13829.xnf?BodyFormat>, all accessed 17 April 2011.

⁹ Web site <http://www.archive.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/seu> accessed 10 April 2011.

¹⁰ Glen Loury. *Social Exclusion and Ethnic Groups: The Challenge to Economics*, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2000, 2.

Ruth Levitas suggests that the term points to ‘...*the breakdown of the structural, cultural and moral ties which bind the individual to society.*’¹¹ The stigmatization and social exclusion experienced by young men in Bromford has echoes of the ‘...*emptiness...and loss of meaning...*’ described by Kenneth Leech in an east London context and of the anomie and alienation which Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx argue results from the experience of being considered valueless in a capitalist society.¹² How then does their experience of multifaceted social exclusion impact on the ways in which young men in Bromford think and talk about spirituality?

‘Believing’ in Bromford

None of the young men whom I have got to know in Bromford are involved with any formal faith group, indeed for them ‘religion’ is for other, older and more powerful people. The socially engaged church that embodies the search for the ‘common good’ or God’s ‘bias to the oppressed’ is not something that they have seen or experienced in their community. One young man told me in powerful tones, ‘*I believe in God but He doesn’t live round here!*’ In light of this can we talk with any credibility about the ‘belief’ and ‘spirituality’ of the ‘NEET’s of Bromford?

The word ‘belief’ brings baggage with it. When we use the word we carry with us the weight of history and the cultural assumptions of faith. Perhaps there are three ways in which the idea of ‘believing’ can be expressed. First we can talk about ‘belief’ as the personal assent to a specific set of values and doctrines – the ‘I believe...’ of the Creed. Such a perspective also views ‘belief’ as a relational concept. We explore and express our ‘belief’ alongside other people as the ‘Body of Christ’.

¹¹ Ruth Levitas. *The Inclusive Society? Social Exclusion and New Labour*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 21.

¹² Leech, Kenneth. *The Sky is Red – Discerning the Signs of the Times*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1997, 90; Emile Durkheim. *The Division of Labour in Society*. New York: The Free Press, 1997, 300-310 and Karl Marx. ‘Capital: A Critique of Political Economy’ cited in David McLellan. *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 482-483.

We might call this ‘believing **and** belonging’. Second we can see ‘belief’ in more privatised terms. The sociologist Grace Davie has spoken of what she calls ‘believing **without** belonging’ – a broad affirmation of generalised religious (usually Christian, says Davie) values which is not translated into any meaningful engagement with formal faith groups. Davie suggests that this ‘common religion’ is far more widespread than those who depict the UK as a ‘secular’ society admit. It is fluid and provisional in character and not tied to notions of ‘orthodoxy’. Davie suggests that such ‘believing’ is characterised as much by ‘...heterodox ideas (about)...healing, the paranormal, fortune telling, fate and destiny, life after death, ghosts...prayer and meditation and luck and superstition...’ as it is by an affirmation of a broad-brush Christian ethical framework.¹³ Third we can perhaps think of ‘belief’ more as an expression of a social, ethnic or national identity than individual faith and values – ‘believing **in** belonging’. The anthropologist Abby Day suggests that such ‘belief’ amongst young adults in the UK is not tied to formalized understandings or categories. It is, nevertheless, an important mechanism for making sense of life that is rooted in communal life rather than any overarching narrative of meaning.¹⁴

David Voas and Alasdair Crockett suggest that, ‘...residual religiosity...often [has]...little personal, let alone, alone, social significance.’¹⁵ Their suggestion that formalized ‘belief’ continues to decline resonates with my experience working alongside young men in Bromford. However to infer from this that because they do not ‘believe **and** belong’ these young men are ‘card carrying’ secularists would be mistaken. The disenchantment that they express is with distant and disengaged organized religion not with the possibility of ‘God’. Even the language of ‘believing **without** belonging’ does not resonate with what I have learned as I have got to know these young men. The stories they tell, the rap music they write and perform and the graffiti art that they have created cannot easily be confined within

¹³ Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994, 3.

¹⁴ Abby Day, ‘Believing in belonging: An ethnography of young people’s constructions of belief’, *Culture and Religion*, 2009, 10: 3, 276.

¹⁵ David Voas and Alasdair Crockett ‘Religion in Britain: Neither Believing nor Belonging’ in *Sociology*, 39:11, 2005, London: Sage, 2005, 14.

even an elastic understanding of ‘belief’ for it transcends or disregards the doctrinal borders guarded by people of faith and the ethnic borders that are of such significance to the racist English Defence League that has started to organize on the estate.¹⁶ So what can be said?

Bromford Dreams – Graffiti Spiritualities in the Third Space

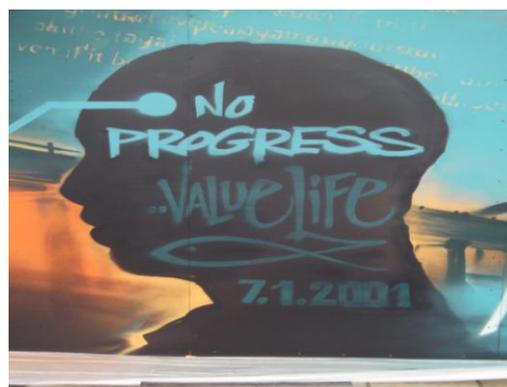
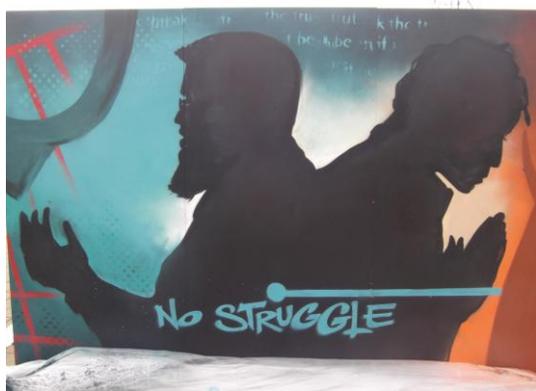
Many of the young men I have got to know left school with few (if any) G.C.S.E’s. However give them a laptop or a spray can and they record rap music and fashion graffiti art that is more articulate than many of the A* university student essays that I read! During February 2012 I organised the week long ‘Bromford Dreams’ graffiti spirituality project with the help of my friend the street artist Mohammed ‘aerosol’ Ali. The first day of the project revolved around an initial workshop at ‘The Hub’ youth centre in Bromford, a visit to Mohammed Ali’s gallery in the Muslim majority community of Sparkbrook, lunch in a Halal restaurant and a visit to the Mosque where Mohammed prays each day (a first for all of the group). Arising from this ‘exposure’ the young men discussed then mapped out the design of the eight foot tall cube that they would be painting.



The design itself drew upon their experience of social exclusion, the attitudes they felt people had towards young men on council estates, a strong rootedness in the Bromford, a clear resistance to English Defence League propaganda on the estate and a ‘post-religious’ spirituality characterised by hope and

¹⁶ Web site <http://englishdefenceleague.org> accessed 16 January 2013.

resistance. The young men themselves all agreed that the Cube needed to reflect what they felt was the importance of prayer and solidarity and their refusal to remain trapped by negative stereotypes as well as their sense of powerlessness and their experience of unemployment and life in a neglected urban community. The four faces of the Cube reflected this and perhaps point towards what could be called a blurred ‘third space’ spirituality:¹⁷



Rooted Discourses of Meaning

The ways in which we make sense of the world are inextricably linked to our experience. Tim Gorringer writes, *'To be human is to live in this council house, semi-detached, tower block, farmhouse,*

¹⁷ Details about the Bromford Dreams graffiti spiritualities project can be found on the project web site – <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/bromforddreams>

*mansion...These facts...form the fabric of our everyday lives, structuring our memories, determining our attitudes.*¹⁸ Young men in Bromford have given voice to their ‘Bromford Dreams’ in their music and their graffiti art. There is a contextual boundary hopping spirituality that is shaped (but not determined) by the streets of the Bromford estate. Henri Lefebvre writes extensively about the constructed nature of social space – created and infused with meaning rather than inert and pre-existing. For Lefebvre the communities which we share are forged from a relationship between ‘conceived’ space (the purpose that those with power attribute to specific social space), ‘perceived’ space (our experience and understanding of social space) and ‘representational’ space (the ways which people use social space to make their own meaning).¹⁹ Lefebvre suggests that, *‘Representational space is alive. It speaks.’*²⁰ We give meaning to the social space we share as Gorringe reminds us, *‘People ensoul...the settlements in which they dwell.’*²¹ Young men in Bromford have subverted spaces designed by the powerful. Street corners, the children’s play area, the parade of shops, the territory beneath the M6 flyover and the ‘wasteland’ have become the ‘representational’ spaces where insurgent spiritualities are forged that ignore carefully defended categories and boundaries and which give the lie to the dismissal of ‘NEET’s as exemplars of what Prime Minister David Cameron has called ‘broken Britain’.²²

Believing beyond boundaries

In his recent book *The Hybrid Church* Chris Baker reflects on the nature of faith and spirituality in the ever changing and fluid world of the twenty-first century city. Drawing on the work of the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha, Baker speaks about a ‘third space’ world – *‘...the space produced by the collapse of*

¹⁸ Timothy J. Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 1.

¹⁹ Henri Lefebvre, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith. *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 38-46.

²⁰ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 42.

²¹ Gorringe, *A Theology of the Built Environment*, 216.

²² Web Site <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/15/david-cameron-riots-broken-society> accessed 14 January 2013.

*the previously defining narratives of modernity based on colonialism, class and patriarchy.*²³ The ‘third space’ is a fluid in-between both and space, the rubbing up point between fixed ideas and identities. The young men I have got to know in Bromford live in this ‘third space’, a place characterised by what Baker calls ‘blurred encounters’ and the potential building site for a, ‘*open ended and fluid Christology.*’²⁴ What I have encountered as I have worked alongside young men on this socially excluded urban estate is neither a new form of ‘belief’ nor an avowedly secular discourse of meaning. What I have begun to glimpse is a fluid, provisional and articulate spirituality that is rooted in but not confined by stigmatising social exclusion and the edge life of a forgotten part of the city. Theirs is a story that bears witness to the presence of the Spirit amongst marginalised communities and a provisional spirituality that subverts guarded borders and challenges people of faith to listen and learn. The urban planning theorist Leonie Sandercock writes about the enduring human yearning for meaning even in a ‘post-religious’ age asking, ‘*How can cities...nurture our unrequited thirst for the spirit, for the sacred?*’²⁵ Considering the search for meaning in a fluid world where solid religion no longer meets the questions of a majority of people Gordon Lynch speaks of our ongoing urge to, ‘*...discover some meaning beyond ourselves, even if our glimpses of it are only partial or fleeting...*’, for ‘*...moments of encounter with the ‘ground of [our] being.*’²⁶

In the aftermath of the Second World War Paul Tillich searched for a way of thinking about ‘God’ which replaces transcendence with immanence and distance with intimacy. For Tillich to speak of ‘God’ is to speak of ‘depth’, ‘being’ and ‘ultimate concern’...’...*forget everything traditional you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself...He who knows about depth knows about God.*²⁷ Is

²³ Christopher Richard Baker. *The Hybrid Church in the City: Third Space Thinking*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007, 16. See too Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 1994.

²⁴ Baker, *The Hybrid Church*, 26 and 146.

²⁵ Leonie Sandercock, *Towards Cosmopolis*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1998, 219.

²⁶ Gordon Lynch, *After Religion: Generation X and the Search for Meaning*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002, 102 and 115.

²⁷ Paul Tillich. *The Shaking of the Foundations*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1949, 64.

this perhaps an echo of a ‘NEET spirituality’ within the canon of Christian existentialism and a challenge to those seeking to understand contemporary ‘religious’ discourse?

The multifaceted spirituality that I have begun to identify cannot credibly be seen as a new model of religious discourse. The young men alongside whom I have worked do not ‘defer to a higher authority’ as Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead put it.²⁸ Their narrative is their own. The picture is messy but story I am encountering revolves around ‘believing’ in your mates (solidarity), ‘believing’ that a future is possible (hope), ‘believing’ although you’re forgotten (resistance) and ‘believing’ across boundaries (anti-racist). It is a ‘nitty-gritty’ spirituality of immanence and subversive hope within which graffiti art becomes the new ‘icon’ and ‘grime’ rap the new sacred music.

It can be a theodicy of exclusion: a spirituality that rages against God and social exclusion. However young men in Bromford are more shaped by the fluidity of the urban ‘third space’ and by boundary-hopping hip-hop than they are by ethnic or religious essentialism. They believe in each other but what I have witnessed is solidarity not raciology. And yet ‘NEET spirituality’ can also signify a movement beyond scapegoating and materialism towards a narrative of solidarity and resistance. Tek9’s powerful lyrics reflect a ‘nitty-gritty’ engagement with street level violence, poverty, the stereotyping of urban youth, minimum wage labour and social isolation does - a ‘post-religious’ echo of the hermeneutics of suspicion and the divine bias to the oppressed which lies at the heart of such liberative spiritualities. This fluid spirituality arises from deep-seated social exclusion and:

- Is place-based: shaped but not determined by context
- Is un-dogmatic and anti-institutional
- Sacralises the individual but is communal in character

²⁸ Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead, Ed. *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is Giving Way to Spirituality*. Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, 3-4.

- Is messy and contradictory, fluid and unfinished
- Subverts conceived and perceived social space
- Is organic and street literate
- Revolves around immanence not transcendence
- Arises from suffering but is not limited by it
- Is largely expressed through popular culture
- Is more performed than proposed
- Is characterised by place based boundary hopping
- Is characterised by hope, resistance and solidarity
- Is not ‘religion’

Conclusion

I do not want to close this article with a neat conclusion and a recipe for engaged urban mission in the blurred world of the estates that ring cities across the UK. Such neatness would not accurately reflect either the dynamic nature of estate life in the twenty-first century or the open-endedness of the Kingdom spirituality that Jesus embodies in the Gospels. Instead let me close with a question – Is the Christian community open enough to listen to and learn from the blurred, boundary-hopping spirituality of young men like those I have got to know without seeking to tidy up the story they tell or clothe it in ‘Fresh Expressions’ garments?. This article has simply presented a snapshot of a world often hidden from view and the search for meaning amongst unemployed young men in the face of a political class who has written them off and an institutional church that does not understand. The question is this – Are we ready to listen to their tale?

Chris Shannahan

University of Birmingham

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