

# The Canaanite Woman and Urban Liberation Theology

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# **The Canaanite Woman and Urban Liberation Theology**

## **Introduction**

It can be confusing living in Britain in 2013. We often read that Britain is a ‘Christian’ country but also that we live in a secular society. Political leaders proclaim that Britain is a tolerant society and yet 25% of voters in the 2013 English Local Elections voted for the UK Independence Party which masks a thinly veiled xenophobia beneath a veneer of Eurosceptic respectability.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore we live in a country where the far-right Islamophobic English Defence League has, since its establishment in 2009, sought to divide Britons on the basis of the faith they proclaim. And yet, in spite of the recent speech of the current Prime Minister David Cameron insisting that multiculturalism has ‘failed’ the 2011 National Census revealed that the number of people self-defining as dual heritage has doubled to 1.2 million in the last ten years.<sup>2</sup> People of faith are told to ‘keep out of politics’ even though politicians have realised that the grass roots social capital of faith groups enables them to connect with marginalised communities in a manner that politicians could only dream of in the ‘big society’. Are churches, mosques and gurdwaras the prime civil society welfare delivery agencies in an ‘age of austerity’ or are they called, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, to ram a spoke into the ‘wheel of injustice’?

The challenges people of faith face in 2013 are not a million miles away from the questions that the people of Palestine were asking almost 2,000 years ago. Then, like now, people of faith lived with tension – God made us all in the divine image and yet ‘chose’ one specific people as a special community. Does the divine bias to the oppressed only apply to those who are on the religious ‘inside’ or, as the Old Testament prophets and the writer of the New Testament letter to the Hebrews remind us, are we called to privilege the ‘stranger’, thereby welcoming angels with knowing it? In this article I will try to build a bridge between the Palestinian world of Jesus and the context within which the urban Church struggles with difference in 2013 in an attempt to ask what lessons the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 might have for Christians seeking to forge a liberative urban theology in the city in a super-diverse twenty-first century.

## Siting Myself in the City

Barbara Johnstone suggests that, ‘Discourse is shaped by the world and shapes the world.’<sup>3</sup> The way we think and speak about the world and about faith is moulded by our experience. For the last thirty years I have lived, worked and worshipped in the city. The dizzying diversity, the contradictions, the possibilities and the pain of cities like Kingston Jamaica, London and Birmingham is the crucible within which my faith has been forged. In the city the forces that shape wider society are magnified. Poverty and wealth; and the fear of difference and new cultural forms stand side by side in stark relief. It is out of this vibrant context that urban theology began to emerge in the UK in the early 1970s as an engaged expression of contextual theology. Urban theology is exemplified by an interdisciplinary critical reflection on the relationship between urban life and religious faith and is, to a degree, a British phenomenon. In other urbanized contexts such as the USA we more often hear of urban mission or urban ministry. Urban liberation theologians draw upon the foundational principles of the theology of liberation that emerged first in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. So we ask what might it mean to say that God has a bias to the oppressed in the complex and diverse British context and how might people of faith assert a culturally credible preferential option for the oppressed in the city? Such questions focused the thinking of two of key pioneers of British urban theology – the Anglican Kenneth Leech and the Methodist John Vincent. The city, however, has been transformed since Leech and Vincent wrote so passionately. Whilst the Anglican report *Faith in the City* (1985) stimulated creative fresh thinking and its ecumenical successor *Faithful Cities* (2006) connected urban theology much more fully with other academic disciplines and the normative diversity of the twenty-first century Vincent and Leech arguably remain the dominant ‘giants’ within Church thinking about urban theology.<sup>4</sup> We are living on a new landscape in 2013, which demands fresh thinking if urban theology is to engage credibly with the contemporary city and not find itself parked in a cultural cul-de-sac that very few people travel down. What kind of urban theology can speak to the twenty-first century city? The story of Jesus encounter with the Canaanite woman can give us some clues.

## **I'm Not Neutral**

Kenneth Leech suggests that, 'Theology can either oppress people or help to liberate them.'<sup>5</sup> None of us are neutral and neither is theology. This is not a contentious claim but a common sense reflection on the inevitability that our understanding of theology, the bible and faith is shaped by the values upon which we build our lives and our experience of the world. My understanding of urban theology and my approach to the story of Jesus' encounter with Canaanite woman is shaped by my own experience of urban life in general and of attitudes to cultural and religious diversity in particular. Furthermore it is built on the same conviction that motivated Leech. Theology is not neutral nor can it be neutered (although sometimes we try to draw its sting). Theology can either underwrite injustice (as we have seen so often in relation to slavery, colonialism, apartheid or poverty) or it can challenge oppressive structures and systems because, as the pioneer of Latin American liberation theology Gustavo Gutierrez reminds us, 'This is a theology which does not stop with reflecting on the world, but rather tries to be part of the process through which the world is transformed.'<sup>6</sup>

In this article I want to respond to the challenge laid down by Gutierrez and Leech. I will ask how an ethic prioritizing insignificance and liberative reversals can help us to see Matthew 15:21-28 in a fresh way and how a hermeneutics of liberative difference might challenge our attitude to the passage and to the person of Jesus. Above all I will ask how such approaches can resource the church as it seeks to stand with those who are left out and left behind in the city today. But before we do that I should say a word or two about the idea of prioritizing insignificance, the practice of liberative reversals and the hermeneutics of liberative difference.

## **Prioritizing Insignificance and Liberative Reversals**

Elsa Tamez suggests that as we read the bible we encounter a God who, '...identified himself with the poor to such an extent that their rights become the rights of God himself.'<sup>7</sup> In Mark 10:32-34 Jesus blesses a child whom his disciples have pushed aside, telling them that children will have pride of place in the Kingdom of God. In John 4:1-42 Jesus meets a Samaritan woman who has come alone to collect water from the well in the heat of the day. As a Samaritan this stranger is the demonized 'other'. As a woman she should not speak to

Jesus in public. Jesus astounds his disciples by asking her for a drink and debating faith with her. As we read the bible we meet a God who prioritises insignificance. The ‘last’ become the ‘first’ and the edge becomes the centre as Jesus engages in a ministry of liberative reversals as seen in the illustrative diagram below -

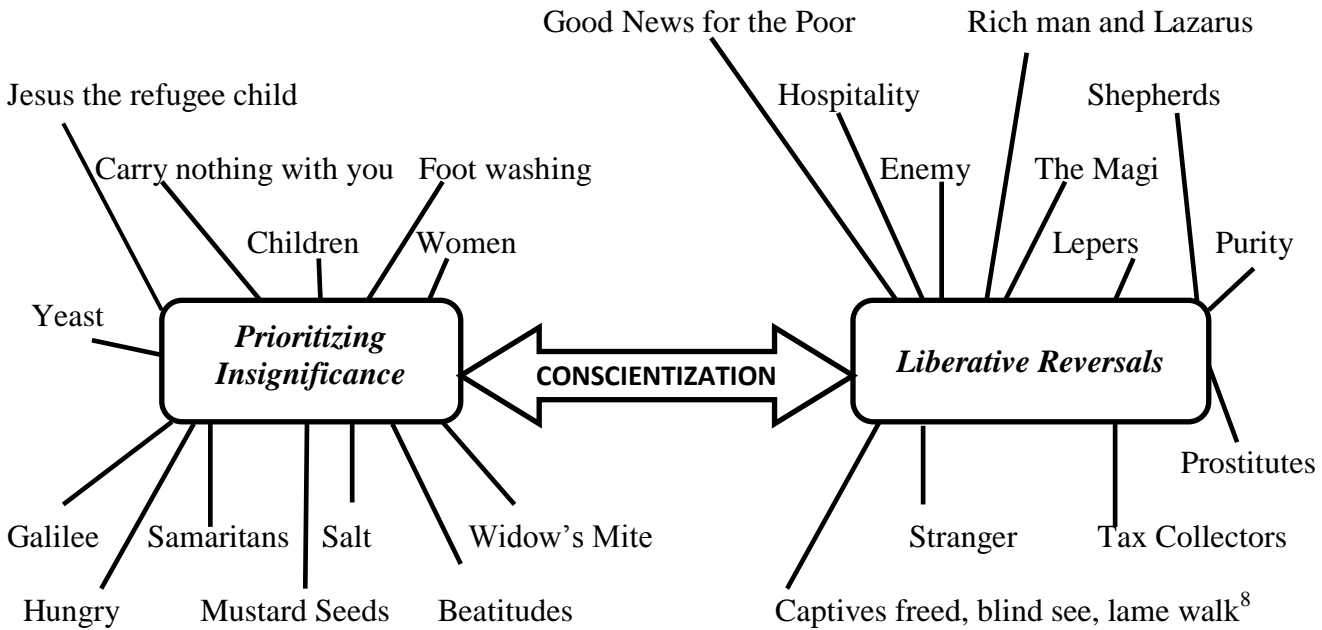


Figure 1 – Prioritizing Insignificance and Liberative Difference

Jesus' beatitudes mark the beginning of his public ministry in Matthew's Gospel. It is the 'poor in spirit' (Matthew 5:3) and those who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness' (Matthew 5:6) who are blessed. However in the less widely quoted 'blessings and woes' in Luke 6:20-26 we find a more powerful theology of liberative reversals – 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled...' (Luke 6:20-21). Those considered worthless – the asylum seeker, the unemployed young man on a housing estate, the redundant car worker - become the blessed ones, those whom God favours. The writer of Proverbs 14 amplifies the point, 'Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honour him...' (Proverbs 14:31). As Figure 1 above indicates those whom society considers insignificant or worthless are placed centre stage by Jesus (the widow, the child, the woman, the Samaritan, the worker, the prostitute). In her Magnificat Mary embodies the divine prioritizing of insignificance

as she sings, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord...for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.’ (Luke 1:47-48). It is an unmarried pregnant teenager who first declares a gospel of liberative reversals. God has ‘brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly...filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty...’ (Luke 1:52-53). Such a perspective could revolutionise the way we approach the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman and the way we ‘do’ theology in the city.

### **Towards a Hermeneutics of Liberative Difference**

The social anthropologist Steven Vertovec suggests that even our diversity is diverse in the twenty-first century. He suggests that the seemingly solid world of settled ethnic groups has become increasingly fluid and provisional in recent decades. Increasingly, he suggests, we live in ‘super-diverse’ societies, noting that whilst, ‘Multicultural policies have had as their overall goal the promotion of tolerance and respect for collective identities...’ the landscape of the contemporary city is far more complex, provisional and multifaceted than policy makers recognise.<sup>9</sup> Andrew Davey neatly summarises this urban super-diversity, ‘You only have to walk down the streets of any major city to encounter the world...You will see goods displayed that have been made in the factories and sweatshops of the South...Magazines and newspapers will combine the issues of communities thousands of miles away and those in the immediate locality.’<sup>10</sup> Identity therefore cannot be placed neatly in a sealed box. We don’t live in clear cut either-or cities but in blurred both-and communities where identities are always in process of becoming – made and then re-made again and again. We live, as Chris Baker suggests, in a fluid ‘third space’ society where the fixed certainties of the past are supplanted by dynamic and provisional fluidity.

This landscape of difference is not universally welcomed and can be the site of tension, exclusion and violence as the street-level brutality of the English Defence League has demonstrated since its establishment in 2009. Before we dismiss the attitudes exemplified by the EDL as far right ramblings we should recall the ways in which leading politicians within both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party have either sought to demonise the so-called ‘stranger’ or to smother diversity beneath the homogenising blanket of community

cohesion. It is in this context that the Church must grapple more convincingly with diversity and commit itself more fully and more intelligently to the ongoing struggle for racial justice.

The Canaanite woman lived in a world where the ‘stranger’ was demonised, literally and figuratively an ‘outsider’. How might a hermeneutics of liberative difference enable us to re-read Matthew 15:21-28, thereby laying the ground for a new cross-cultural and potentially inter-faith urban liberation theology? First, a hermeneutics of liberative difference will not theorize away diversity under the convenient cloak of hybridity or freeze cultures in time, locked safely away in sealed ethnic boxes. Second, a hermeneutics of liberative difference can help to critique all forms of reductionism thereby enabling an honest wrestling with the complex nature of oppression and the need for a model of mutual liberation that honours the diversity of the city. Third, because it is characterized by a prioritizing of insignificance a commitment to a hermeneutics of liberative difference does not preclude judgements about truth or justice. Liberative difference is dialogue with an edge - it does not only prioritize perceived insignificance but proactively privileges the demonized. Fourth, because it engages in an honest way with super-diverse social space a hermeneutics of liberative difference can help us to understand the contested nature of the city more fully. It can give us the tools to critique the carving up of the city into ‘Muslim’ space, ‘Christian’ space, ‘Jewish’ space, ‘Sikh’ space, ‘Hindu’ space, ‘Buddhist’ space, ‘black’ space’ or ‘white’ space.

Having spoken briefly about these three tools let us now see how a prioritizing of difference, a practice of liberative reversals and a hermeneutics of liberative difference can be put into practice in as we re-read the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Canaanite woman.

### **Border Crossings – A Canaanite Mother Challenges Jesus**

The description of Jesus’ encounter with a desperate Canaanite mother takes place on the borderland. It is a powerful story which is recorded by Matthew (15:21-28) and Mark (7:24-30) but I wonder if we avoid its uncomfortable glare. Instead of facing the narrative head on preachers, in my personal experience, either avoid

the encounter altogether of spiritualise it, smoothing away its dangerous and subversive edginess. In spite of this the encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus is a story for our super-diverse but divided cities. Two approaches to the story can offer us creative tools which can help us as we reflect on the implications of the encounter for people of faith in the city today.

First there is dub practice, which has been widely used in reggae music for almost half a century. A producer, record engineer or DJ strips away keyboards, guitar and vocals leaving only the tracks foundational melody and beat upon which a new lyric is laid. Dub practice revolves around a process of deconstruction and reconstruction. The pioneer of British black theology, Robert Beckford argues that, ‘Dub is more than a musical technique: it is...a quest for meaning.’<sup>11</sup> Beckford suggests that the Jesus we encounter in the Gospels acts like a dub DJ – he challenges existing assumptions and ideologies that damage and deny in order to re-shape a new liberated situation within which those considered insignificant experience, perhaps for the first time, the wholeness of life or *shalom* that is their birth right as children of God. For Beckford, ‘Rebuilding is guided by an emancipation ethic which seeks out redemptive themes in history, culture and society that can be the focus for transforming the original thesis...to ‘dub’ is to engage with the social world through prophetic action.’<sup>12</sup>

A second resource is found in reader-response approaches to biblical hermeneutics. Does meaning lie inert in a text? The postcolonial biblical critic Fernando Segovia suggests not. He argues that meaning rests not within the text but in the dynamic relationship between reader and scripture.<sup>13</sup> Robert Fowler summarises, ‘No longer can meaning be understood to be a stable determinate content that lies buried within the text...meaning becomes a dynamic event in which we ourselves participate.’<sup>14</sup> Consequently a re-imagining of Scripture can give rise to a range of alternative readings rather than a unifying orthodoxy. In the hands of a conscientised reader the biblical text, as Walter Wink notes, can become an incendiary text subverting all forms of exclusion and marginalization and feeding the practice of liberative reversals.<sup>15</sup>

Armed with our commitment to prioritising insignificance, liberative reversals, a hermeneutics of liberative difference and the resources provided by dub practice and reader response approaches to the biblical



text let us remind ourselves of the story of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. In the verses that precede this encounter Jesus has been preaching in Galilee. Two aspects of the first half of Matthew 15 are of importance in our reflection on Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. First in Matthew 15:1-9 Jesus clashes with the religious elite over 'the tradition of the elders'. The religious leaders criticise Jesus for allowing his disciples to eat without washing their hands in accordance with tradition (15:1-2) but he responds with a subversive challenge, 'for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. You hypocrites!' (15:6-7a). Second, seemingly in response, Jesus speaks to the crowds about the things that defile us (15:10-20) – 'Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles....Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? <sup>18</sup> But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles.' (15:11 and 17-18)

In light of Jesus' words what comes next is ironic. Matthew suggests that Jesus left Galilee after these encounters and travelled to the port cities of Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia (modern day Lebanon). This was a diverse gentile region shaped by Roman economics and Greek culture. It was geographically and theologically beyond the border. Matthew tells us that a 'Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, 'Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.' (15:22) This doubly-excluded mother (a woman and a gentile) subverts cultural and theological norms as she challenges a man, a Jew, a religious teacher. And yet, as Matthew notes, Jesus ignores her and then rejects her, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' (15:24) An 'insider' dismisses an 'outsider' as theologically insignificant. It is not a surprise that this passage is regularly smoothed over, ignored or spiritualized by preachers. However the blunt truth, as we read it in scripture, is that Jesus too was hemmed in by xenophobia. Such a statement contradicts our perceptions of Jesus as the 'Word made flesh' and as the person who frames Samaritans as the heroes/heroines of much of his teaching. He is a cultural, ethnic and gender boundary hopper but he rejects this Canaanite woman as a cultural 'other'. And yet this desperate mother will not be so easily dismissed. In spite of her further challenge Jesus rejects her for a second time, this time more pointedly, contrasting the 'children' of

Israel with gentile ‘dogs’ (15:26). The Canaanite woman persists, challenging Jesus’ xenophobia, ‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.’ (15:27) Jesus responds, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ (15:28)

**Dubbing Jesus and the Canaanite Woman and Placing Ourselves in the Story**

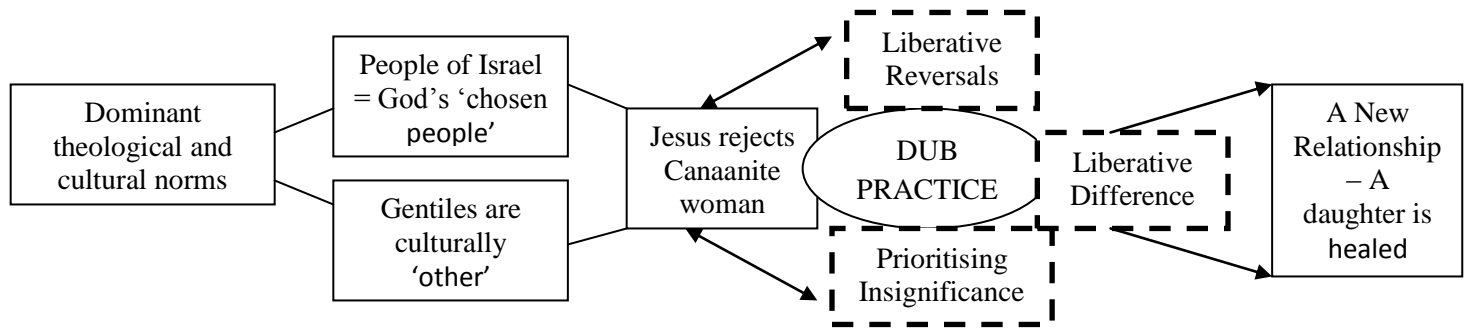


Figure 2 – Dub Practice and Matthew 15

The tools provided by dub practice, when allied with the re-imagining of the core values of liberation through a prioritizing of insignificance, the practice of liberative reversals and a hermeneutics of liberative difference, can help us to deconstruct Jesus’ initial rejection of the Canaanite woman. Such an approach enables us to identify the cultural and theological exclusivism that marks Jesus’ response. In light of our deconstruction we can reconstruct an alternative liberative reading, which can resource people of faith in the super-diverse but divided cities of the twenty-first century.

On the basis of this ‘Jesus and the Canaanite Woman Dub’ we are able to draw on reader response approaches to the bible in order to inhabit the story ourselves. In a manner akin to the use of imagination within Ignatian spirituality we ‘see’ ourselves in the passage and as we do so we bring our experience of life in the super-diverse city with us. In the process we make meaning, bringing our own encounters with cultural and religious diversity, our own experience of being marginalised by the racism of others or of excluding other people as a result of our own racism into a dynamic dialogue with the Gospel. Are we an asylum seeker on a majority white urban housing estate? Are we a black woman Minister within a majority white suburban

Church? Are we a white school teacher in a majority black/Muslim church school? Are we a dual heritage couple active in a majority white church? Have we been turned away from church because of our skin colour? Our engagement with the text is shaped by who and where we are.

### **Rooted In This Place But No Longer Confined By It**

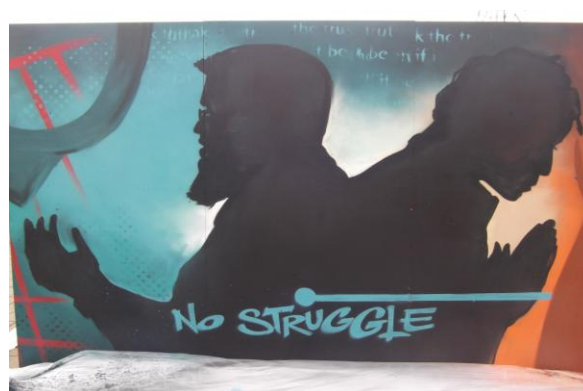
A commitment to a prioritizing of insignificance, the practice of liberative reversals and a hermeneutics of liberative difference can help us to dub Jesus encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15. It is a practice that can offer new resources to urban faith communities in the dynamic, diverse and contested cities of the twenty-first century. Perhaps sometimes we take the social space that we share in the city for granted, unconsciously imagining it to be natural and neutral. The work of the political philosopher Henri Lefebvre (especially his 1991 book *The Production of Space*) can help us to re-think. The public space of the city is created rather than given; dynamic and not inert. The spaces of the city carry messages about the kind of city we live in and the people to whom it belongs. As Tim Gorringer reminds us, ‘The ideology of space is inescapable.’<sup>16</sup> Lefebvre suggests that we can think of social space in three ways. First, we can see space as being ‘conceived’ by planners or politicians for a particular people or purpose. Second, we can reflect on the ways in which we live in or ‘perceive’ the spaces of the city. Third, suggests Lefebvre, we can reflect on spaces of ‘representation’ – those spaces where we can create our own story, our own meaning and a future that may subvert the guarded borders and expectations of the powerful.<sup>17</sup> For Lefebvre, ‘Representational space is alive. It speaks.’<sup>18</sup> Spaces of representation can become the crucibles within which we fashion new relationships with each other and with the city.

Between 2010 and 2012 I spent most of my time working alongside unemployed young men on a large urban housing estate in Birmingham. The estate has the second highest rate of unemployment in the UK and is amongst the 2% most multiply deprived neighbourhoods in England and Wales. It is just four miles from the regenerated city centre and iconic ‘Bullring’ but it might as well be a million miles away. It is a community that

many people either do not know exists or try to avoid. One young man recently described it to me as a ‘no-go-area’; a place that other young people refer to as ‘the slum’. It is an estate where the Islamophobic English Defence League has been active for the last eighteen months. Two of my own photographs of the estate symbolise the ways in which we continue to carve up the city into excluding ethnic zones whilst, on the other hand, leaping over guarded ethnic and religious boundaries to stand in anti-racist solidarity together. The first image is a photograph of a boarded up pub on the estate. The graffiti was painted by a young man I know who tells me ‘It’s the Somalis’ fault that I don’t have a job.’



The second photograph is of one side of a huge graffiti spiritualities cube entitled ‘Bromford Dreams’ which formed part of a project I created at the end of my time on the estate as a way of enabling the young men to raise their own (often ignored) voice and tell their own (often demonised) story. The image, which was designed and painted by the young men shows two silhouetted figures joined together - one Muslim, the other Christian in prayer. Through the power of their spray cans the young men have created a cube that subverts stereotypes. It can be seen as their very own an anti-racist space of representation in the face of EDL activism.



The Canaanite woman was excluded because of her gender, her ethnicity and her religion and yet she subverted cultural norms by challenging Jesus' xenophobia. Young men on the Bromford estate in Birmingham are equally dismissed and demonized as 'work-shy' N.E.E.Ts (not in employment, education or training). The community within which they live is largely ignored and has become the site within which the far-right has begun to organise. In this context what might it mean to prioritise insignificance? Some young men, like the man I know who scrawled the EDL graffiti on the boarded up pub turn to Islamophobia and turn on convenient scapegoats. Others resist and with their spray cans subvert the stereotypes society has of them through a process of liberative reversals and an organic hermeneutics of liberative difference. Does the urban church have ears to hear their story?

### **Conclusion**

Jesus' transformative encounter with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15 begins with rejection but ends in the creation of a new and intercultural space of representation. It is a story for our times and, when informed by an open-hearted engagement in the dynamic and provisional 'third space' of the city it has the capacity to renew excluding models of urban liberation theology that remain hemmed in by what we could call a theological camp mentality and patterns of church that exclude or even demonise the 'stranger', the cultural 'other' – those perceived not to 'belong'. Perhaps the story also can help us to re-think the ways in which we approach the social space of the city and provide us with the tools to forge daring and imaginative plural spaces of representation within which we can, together, live out a faith that is shaped by the prioritizing of insignificance, the practice of liberative reversals and a hermeneutics of liberative difference. The Canaanite woman dared Jesus to broaden his vision. She challenges the urban church in the super-diverse but contested twenty-first century to do the same.

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## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> Web site, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/blog/2013/may/03/local-elections-2013-live-blog> , accessed 14 May 2013.
- <sup>2</sup> Re the speech in Munich in 2011 by David Cameron see web site - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994>, accessed 14 May 2013. In the 2001 National Census in the UK 677,177 people self-defined as 'mixed' race. In the 2011 National Census 1,200,000 people self-defined as 'mixed' race. See web site <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2012/dec/11/census-data-released-live-coverage> accessed 10 May 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> Barbara Johnstone. *Discourse Analysis*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, 10.
- <sup>4</sup> Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas. *Faith in the City: A Call for Action by Church and Nation*. London: Church House, 1985 and Commission on Urban Life and Faith. *Faithful Cities: A Call for Celebration, Vision and Justice*. London: Methodist Publishing House and Church House Publishing, 2006.
- <sup>5</sup> Kenneth Leech. *The Sky is Red: Discerning the Signs of the Times*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1997, 50.
- <sup>6</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez. *A Theology of Liberation*. London: SCM Press, 1974, 15.
- <sup>7</sup> Elsa Tamez, *Bible of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982, 73
- <sup>8</sup> Based on Chris Shannahan, *Voices from the Borderland: Re-imagining Cross Cultural Urban Theology in the Twenty-first Century*, London: Equinox, 2010, 240.
- <sup>9</sup> Steven Vertovec (2007): 'Super-diversity and its implications', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30:6, 1027 and *Transnationalism*, London/New York: Routledge, 2009.
- <sup>10</sup> Andrew Davey, *Urban Christianity and Global Order*. London: S.P.C.K, 2001, 3.
- <sup>11</sup> Robert Beckford, *Jesus Dub, Music and Social Change*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006. 67.
- <sup>12</sup> Beckford, *Jesus Dub*, 91-92.
- <sup>13</sup> Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., *Reading from this Place. Volume 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective* Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995, 7-15.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader-Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991, 3.
- <sup>15</sup> Walter Wink. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- <sup>16</sup> T.J. Gorringer. *A Theology of the Built Environment: Justice, Empowerment, Redemption*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 27.
- <sup>17</sup> Henri Lefebvre, transl. Nicholson-Smith, Donald, *The Production of Space*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991 (originally published 1974), especially 33ff.
- <sup>18</sup> Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 42.

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