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Reading the Bible in the City: Urban Culture, Local Context and the Right to Interpret

Jenny Richardson explores her experience of reading the bible in the urban context, both as a resident and also as an educator. Central to her argument is that a critically appropriated concept of class, allied with the categories of modernism and postmodernism, facilitates an understanding of the dissonance that many city people experience with traditional Bible reading methods. She proposes a release of the Bible for transformation and liberation, achievable if the right to interpret the Bible is established among communities that experience living at the margins of both church and society.

I have lived in urban areas (London and Sheffield) for most of my adult life and, with my husband and two teenage sons, inner city Sheffield is now my home. Insights in this paper have come from these experiences and also from my time with Unlock,¹ formally the Evangelical Urban Training Project, where until recently I was employed as Chief Executive. The organization began from concerns that much education (and theology) within church structures was from the perspective of those who have been socially successful. EUTP, from the early 1970s, worked towards enabling local people to make sense both of their own stories of faith and life and those of their neighbours, by bringing Bible stories alongside them, and from this, reaching out to others. Unlock now provides Bible resources, training and consultancy to urban churches around the UK.

In this article, I will consider some of the characteristics of urban lifestyles and will compare them with those found in other parts of Britain and the church. I will also explore the emergence of theology from local urban people. While the term 'urban' can cover differing lifestyles and cultures, I am using it to name those areas described by the Church of England as Urban Priority Areas. 'UPAs are places of severe and increasing deprivation. Economic decline, physical decay, and social disintegration are the three afflictions which denote the poverty of people and places.'² 'UPAs shelter disproportionate numbers of vulnerable people – the

1 Unlock, 336A City Road Sheffield S2 5HF; email: office@unlock.force9.co.uk; website: www.unlock-urban.org.uk.

2 The Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, *Faith in the City*, Church House Publishing, London 1985, p 10 (para 1.19).

unemployed, the unskilled, the uneducated, the sick, the old, and the disadvantaged minority ethnic groups. They are places which suffer conspicuously from low income, dependence on state bureaucracies and social security, ill health, crime, family breakdown and homelessness.³

Urban culture in Britain

It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a complex analysis of working and middle class cultures, but I will attempt to offer a brief view particularly of 'urban culture'. I am using this phrase to summarize the culture of those who live in UPAs: urban areas which would have traditionally accommodated the working classes. According to Richard Scase 'any understanding of class must be located within an analysis of economic production – Class theory – is solely relevant for the study of productive relations that are essentially exploitative and antagonistic between, on the one hand, the producers of economic surplus, and, on the other, the non-producers who privately own the means of production.'⁴

However, many now widen this perspective. Gordon Marshall, Adam Swift and Stephen Roberts identify 'many ways of thinking about class – in terms of ownership or non-ownership of the means of production, control of the various assets within bureaucratic organizations, and possession of marketable workplace skills. Sometimes classes are defined by occupational prestige scores, arranged in hierarchical fashion; or more loosely, in terms of generalized social standing in the community at large – life-styles – or what Max Weber termed 'social status'. Classes have also been described as competing cultures, subcultures, or value systems'.⁵ Ivan Reid also sees that 'social class is a multidimensional concept, involving not only the identification of what are partly invisible categories in society, but also an understanding of the effects of these on the people involved'.⁶ E. P. Thompson describes observing 'patterns in their relationships, their ideas, and their institutions'⁷ and David Cannadine cites the views of 'many historians (who) – see class as the study of language that people used, since it was the words they employed that provided the essential source of their social and political identities'.⁸

Some argue that class is now an outdated term. Margaret Thatcher said, 'Class is a communist concept. It groups people as bundles, and sets them against one another',⁹ and her striving towards a classless society has had significant impact in Britain during the latter part of the twentieth century. Others perceive that the notion of different cultural values is still a relevant one. Arthur Marwick refers to 'contemporary complex, dynamic, loosely stratified society'.¹⁰ Scase takes the view that, 'Despite the ambiguity of definition and the generally perceived lack of

3 *Faith in the City*, p 13 (para 1.23).

4 Richard Scase, *Class*, Open University Press, Maidenhead 1992, p 5f.

5 Gordon Marshall, Adam Swift & Stephen Roberts, *Against the Odds? Social Class and Social Justice in Industrial Societies*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1997, p 21.

6 Ivan Reid, *Social Class Differences in Britain: A Sourcebook*, Open Books, London 1977, p 15.

7 E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Penguin Books, London 1963, p 11.

8 David Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press 1998, p 11.

9 Cannadine, *Class in Britain*, p 2.

10 Arthur Marwick, *Class: Image and Reality in Britain, France and the USA since 1930*, Collins, London 1980, p 305.

relevance of class as a source of personal identity in everyday life, it can be argued that it continues to be crucial for any detailed understanding of the dynamics of Western capitalist society.¹¹ I would agree that there are characteristics of culture with their roots in class systems that are still widely apparent.

Focusing now on these class related cultural characteristics, there appear to be assumptions that all in Britain have embraced modernity. I suggest modernity is, rather, the culture of the formally educated, wealthier and more powerful (middle classes) and has been the dominant culture within Britain and the church. Current cultural analysis often assumes movement from modern to postmodern. However, Dave Tomlinson argues that 'postmodernity is what happens when marginalized peoples refuse to keep quiet any more, and the result is the emergence of a whole new consciousness, which, while embracing the need for objectivity, insists that non-rational perception is of equal importance; that ambiguity, feelings and intuition provide real information too'.¹²

Urban culture is one of these 'marginalized peoples'. My perception is that its characteristics resemble those of pre-modernity, in which people see 'God as the big boss in the sky, and we humans were his subjects, who did his bidding without asking any questions' with 'prevailing mythological and superstitious attitudes – virtually unchallenged'.¹³ Tomlinson also sees postmodernity replacing the superstition of pre-modernity and the reason of modernity with intuition and returning to the mythology of pre-modernity.¹⁴ As the church struggles to bridge the gap between its lifestyle and that of postmodern society in urban areas there has always been a discrepancy between the modern culture of the church and what I perceive to be the pre-modern culture of many urban people.

Modern, postmodern and urban – cultural differences

I will now outline some key differences between modern and urban cultures as I have defined them, while accepting that within any culture the personalities of individuals may be exceptions. I emphasize that I do not imply that any one way of behaving is preferable to another. My view is that all cultures have some aspects that are positive reflections of God's kingdom and others that need to be questioned. My underlying assumption is that all are equally valued in God's sight.

Class and cultural differences are seen as strata within social structures. Those in modern cultures have often been educationally and economically successful, holding positions of authority and respecting others in authority. Those in urban culture are more likely to be labelled educational failures; many experience economic exclusion and powerlessness, with decisions about their lives being made by others. This leads to a mistrust of those in authority. Postmodern culture is different, tending towards a worldview with relativity rather than authority, and equal value of different cultures. Despite this, the powerlessness, marginalization and social and economic exclusion, that are the hallmarks of housing estates, mean that those who live on such estates remain at society's edge. 'Class has a geography as well as a history'.¹⁵

11 Scase, *Class*, p 4.

12 Dave Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, SPCK/Triangle, London 1995, p 89.

13 Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, pp 63f.

14 Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, p 65.

15 Cannadine, *Class*, p 18.

My observation is that those in authority in society and the church have, perhaps unconsciously, considered aspects of urban culture as wrong, rather than different. A young woman in a seminar I was leading was training for work in the church, and she engaged in a discussion about issues of culture. She had been quiet in most class discussions until this point, but the matters resonated powerfully with her own experiences, and she began to share her story. Her childhood home had been on a housing estate, and in her teens she came to faith. Despite efforts to become part of the local church she felt that she was a misfit. She developed in her Christian life and cultural dissonance between church and home became easier to live with. However, this young woman felt unable to invite her family to church evangelistic social events, as she felt they (her family) would not know how to behave. As our discussion progressed, she recognized that the culture of her family was different from that of the church, and she had felt her family's ways were unacceptable. The seminar affirmed the young woman's early culture. I suspect that by then, however, much damage had been done, both to the young woman as an individual and also as a potential evangelist on housing estates. The church had expected her to leave behind her culture as she grew in faith.

Cultural difference shows itself in thinking styles. Modernity tends towards rationality, linear thinking and logic; this thinking is usually abstract. This is perhaps demonstrated in long analytical sermons appreciated by those who have experienced higher education: a style of theology that has historically alienated those from urban culture. In the eighteenth century 'rational Christianity – with its preference for 'candour' and its distrust of 'enthusiasm' – seemed too cold, too distant, too polite, and too much associated with the comfortable values of a prospering class to appeal to the city or village poor. Its very language and tone served as a barrier'.¹⁶ Pre- and postmodern cultures prefer random thought: in patterns, connections and pictures, and emotional content in expressions of faith: discovery of, and interaction with, God at intuitive levels. One of the ways in which emotion is affirmed is through the use of story as a communication medium: urban people use story to indicate solidarity. For example, someone in a pub recounts an experience, this triggers another's memory; they add another story, and the process continues. Subsequent stories express, 'Yes, I understand. I'm with you. I empathize.' There is little analysis, but juxtaposition of stories means that peoples' understanding may develop: one story is seen through the lens of another. The initial storyteller feels someone is there who understands his or her situation. This process resonates with the incarnation of Christ; human beings are not on their own, but there is Someone who cares and understands, whose story is beside them in their story.

Thompson identifies struggles among the working class people for their daily food,¹⁷ symbolic of an emphasis on concrete views of life rather than abstract thinking among urban people. Postmodern culture prefers virtual images and sensory data. These differences can be demonstrated in, for example, harvest celebrations. Those in rural pre-modern culture bring grown produce into the

16 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p 31.

17 Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p 348.

church building; those in urban areas offer carrier bags of tinned food from the supermarket. I have observed a postmodern presentation, with a large projected virtual image of exotic fruits, overlaid with Biblical text. Modern cultures offer a reasoned Biblical exposition as a focus.

Modern culture encourages individual study; 'quiet times' assume the availability of personal space and silence. Urban culture, however, places high value on groups and in particular, the extended family, caricatured in television comedies and soaps. David Lockwood describes the sense of comradeship between working class people who were to each other the three roles of neighbour, workmate and leisure companion.¹⁸ While much has changed from traditional working patterns my observation is that for many in urban culture group identity is still important. One family member frequently spending time on their own would be seen as snubbing others. Alongside this, with the breakdown of many families, excluded individuals live alongside each other on 'hard to let' estates and social relationships appear difficult to establish. This does not, in my view, eliminate the cultural tendencies towards communal relationships; instead it indicates an increasing incidence of social exclusion. Those in postmodern culture learn individually using information technology, choosing their 'own path through a multiple-choice text, pausing here and revisiting there', yet often within a virtual electronic community.¹⁹

Those in modern culture tend to like recognized expertise, in themselves and others, while postmodern culture views the world as having no particular experts, just different perspectives. Those in urban culture are seldom considered experts. There is fluctuation between distrusting those whose knowledge comes from book learning, and deference to a perceived higher status. Lockwood describes proletarian workers, whose 'social consciousness is centred on an awareness of "us" in contradistinction to "them" – "them" are bosses, managers, white collar workers and ultimately, the public authorities of the larger society. Yet even though these outsiders are remote from the community, their power to influence it is well understood – a higher and unapproachable status group of leaders, his "betters", the people who "know how to run things"; those whose performance is guaranteed by "breeding"'.²⁰ This understanding of attitudes to authority in different cultures explains the predominance of well-respected preachers in middle class areas, who have attracted large congregations to listen to their biblical exegesis and interpretation, based on academic studies. The urban church is different, and those who have been successful in formal education are seen as 'different from us'. Book learning, offered from the front of a church set up to resemble a lecture theatre is distrusted, with its style, and cultural assumptions alien to local church members.

Cultural differences have implications in the way the Bible is used, and in the consequent theologies. I would argue with Jayne Scott that 'neither theology nor

18 David Lockwood; 'Sources of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society' in Anthony Giddens & David Held, eds, *Classes, Power and Conflict: Classical Contemporary Debates*, Macmillan Publishers Ltd, London 1982, pp 359-372 (see p 361).

19 Peter Elvy, Exaltbo: A Jerusalem Trust Conference on Christian Communication between the Generations; see *Media Training and Networking* at www.jerusalemproductions.org.uk.

20 Lockwood; 'Sources of Variation in Working-Class Images of Society', pp 362f.

education are neutral zones'²¹ Biblical interpretation is undertaken through the lens of cultural background and it cannot be assumed that there is a pure, culturally free interpretation. An Unlock volunteer was asked by another organization to write Bible studies for use in UPAs with a view to publication; she created and used some materials within her housing estate context. One study focused on Mark 10:35-45. James and John wanted first place in God's kingdom, and Jesus told them that they could not have it! Discussions among those on the housing estate who feel unimportant centred on the value of all in the eyes of Christ and this influenced the final materials offered to the publisher. It was rejected, because the Unlock worker had missed the point of the story: that we should not seek the first place. Exploration of this discrepancy between the insights from the urban people, and the 'correct' interpretation illustrates the way in which the biblical text is read through the cultural lens of the reader. Those whose life experiences make them likely to strive for first place are challenged to take a lower place in God's kingdom. Those who are generally trampled underfoot in social systems rejoice in the way that Jesus values them.

Modernity assumes that there is a 'grand narrative': 'The modern or Enlightenment version of reality, which for a long time has been the "authorized version", can be thought of as a "big" story or epic which tries to tell us everything.'²² The corollary of this is an assumption that there is also one, context free theology. This is based on methods of study which begin with Bible text and identify general principles that emerge, in a rational, logical approach, with information stored (often in written or word processed notes) until needed. This requires the linear thinking of modern culture, labelled by Paulo Freire as 'banking' educational methods²³ where a teacher deposits information in pupils. It focuses on individual learning. However, 'We now live in a postmodern era of decentred and deconstructed discourse in which grand narratives are no longer fashionable because they no longer seem credible... they are now widely dismissed as being deeply and fatally flawed: too teleological, too anachronistic... too reductionist, too masculinist, too all encompassing, too over-determined, too simplistic.'²⁴ It is in this postmodern era that the theological perspective of those in urban culture can perhaps be heard.

Developing contextual Bible reading methods

My own story has relevance at this point. As a young, single woman, I moved into a high-rise block in Sheffield, with beliefs that emphasized the need for individual salvation. I was convinced that my individual faith would mean that I could experience life in all its fullness in whatever context I found myself, and that as a Christian, I needed to share this Good News with others, helping them towards their individual faith. While there, I met and married my husband who had a similar sense of calling to the inner city. We continued to live in the flats, and our first child was born there. Our home was infested with ants, and lifts were often broken, preventing me from leaving my home, with a baby in a buggy. Milk delivery and

21 Jayne Scott; 'Who Dares Lives', *British Journal of Theological Education* 11 (2001), pp 49-64 (see p 50).

22 Tomlinson, *The Post-Evangelical*, p 76.

23 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Penguin, London 1972, pp 45ff.

24 Cannadine, *Class*, p 12.

washing machine repair people would not visit us. Previous Christian teaching led me to the conclusion that negative feelings about my environment were my own fault, and I should be able to claim God's victory in all circumstances and experience a full life. In dialogue with others in the flats I realized many were experiencing similar feelings to myself. It seemed unlikely that we all suffered the same individual spiritual malaise; my conclusion was that the issue was wider than my own personal experience and there was a need for social and political transformation, alongside that of the individual. The theology that had been given to me was inadequate for my context; I needed to work out my Christian understanding with others in my situation.

It was here that I began to develop what I now understand to be methods of contextual theology. My husband and I led a house group as part of our local Anglican church, drawing together a number of other residents from the flats. The group realized that there were others around who might appreciate somewhere to drop in, and we organized a small weekly 'café' in the community centre. Drawing on my background in developmental group work, we used the experience of the café as a starting point for house group meetings and explored the Bible together. The educational method was based on learning from shared, known experiences. The group considered topics such as hospitality, and when group members argued about practicalities, the house group was the place to talk about, and practise, forgiveness.

Understanding of the place of story in urban culture leads on to an appreciation of the use of the Bible as a collection of narratives, the story of God dwelling with his people; these can stand in solidarity with the stories of those whose lives are a daily struggle. Views of the Bible as narrative have developed in recent years, asking questions about the text as story with a scene, characters and a plot and identifying effects of stories on their receivers.²⁵ Narrative criticism is a growing body of knowledge with much to contribute to the use of the Bible in both pre- and postmodern culture.

Using biblical narrative in its raw form means that God's story can stand in solidarity with stories of urban life. I recall, as a group spoke about the people of Israel crossing the desert, a woman suddenly recognizing parallels with her life: 'The manna – they lived hand to mouth – that's just like me. I can't afford extra food in the cupboard; I have to only buy what I'm going to need. God didn't let the Israelites down... he kept giving them their meals each day. He's not going to let me down either.'

In our neighbourhood, a local issue has been an incinerator, polluting the immediate community while providing a source of refuse disposal and heating for others in the city. A number of Christians explored the Bible together in the light of the local situation. A visit to the incinerator revealed a dusty environment and a concrete connection was made between the dust in the faces of the local people, and the story that Jesus told about a man who was set upon by thieves and robbers (Luke 10:25-37), and who would have had his face in the dust, with the 'Good

25 Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin, *How to read Bible stories*, translated by John Bowden, SCM Press, London 1998, pp 4-8.

Samaritan', a person who was socially despised, helping the one in need. The incinerator issue came to a head when Greenpeace acted illegally, climbing the chimney to draw attention to illegal smoke emissions. The group recognized that Greenpeace had similarities to the Samaritan in Jesus' story, in the way they are seen by respectable society; the Christians faced the question of whether Greenpeace and their illegal action was actually the answer to prayer. Continuing to engage in Biblical reflection, the group realized that God is a God of risk with the incarnation itself a symbol of God's willingness to lose reputation and safety. Jesus was vulnerable to the political systems of his time, and his execution was a political act, a decision taken because he upset the *status quo* of the society and religious establishment. To follow the example of Jesus, and stand on the side of the poor and marginalized within society, with concern for their health and well being, meant taking the risk of upsetting the local political system (and, some of the religious authorities). Biblical reflection undergirded the spiritual focus of the campaign. I see this as an example of taking the Bible seriously, and believing that it has insights for the creative and transforming involvement of Christians in society today. Bible study that remains in a safe and sterile environment, I believe, limits the power of its insights to inspire those who live at society's margins.

Laurie Green assists in the clarification of the theological method.²⁶ It begins by exploring concrete experiences and stories, familiar in pre-modern culture, in a group. The Bible is placed alongside the experiences and in solidarity with them. Knowledge of background information about the Bible is offered from Biblical scholars at this point, but local people discover their own connections; contextual interpretation is the role of those who live there, rather than that of the person who has studied theology. Theology done in this way leads to change, for the participants and those they know. This approach to Bible study is an example of Freire's teamwork method of education, affirming dialogue between learners and teachers, with the expectation that all learn and all teach. It values and uses group relationships.

A church that engaged in outreach with those on a nearby housing estate experienced a conflict of Bible study methods. The church opened a café; regular customers stayed to chat, sometimes leading to discussions of spiritual matters. A dilemma emerged as some of these people became ready to take another step towards faith. Café volunteers were concerned that the usual church Bible studies were inappropriate ('too heavy') for themselves and their customers. They explained, 'They (the church members) get a point in the Bible and they worry about what it means... it's highfaluting, and we don't understand it... it doesn't connect with life.' Their moves to start a Bible group in the café, using culturally relevant story based methods, are meeting resistance from those who practise more traditional methods. The modern culture has previously dominated, but the café has enabled those in the church with practical gifts, to reach those around, and in doing so, to gain confidence. They now feel able to express their dissatisfaction with current Bible study approaches. They and those they are reaching are from

26 Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology*, Mowbray, London 1990, p 30.

an urban culture, different from those with authority in the church, and their attempts towards a different style of Bible study are mistrusted. This case study illustrates the existence of cultural gaps, and assumptions that are unintentionally made by those well established in the church, who are keen to pass on what they perceive as correct interpretations. It will need greatly increased understanding and acceptance for the two cultures to study together in one group, on equal terms, with each contributing valuable insights, and all able to learn.

The right to interpret the Bible

This leads me to the question, 'who has the right to interpret the Bible?' Access requirements and learning methods in theological colleges tend to favour the educationally successful (usually middle class), who understandably view the Bible from their own cultural standpoint. However, problems arise when assumptions are then made that their theology is *the theology*, rather than one amongst others, giving power of theological interpretation to just one culture. Freire's alternative view is that, 'Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory towers, but only in communication.'²⁷ A biblical scholar in a marginalized, urban context straddles a culture gap, and a good example of this is Gerald West who has developed a dialogical reading of the Bible with poor communities in South Africa, one that is shaped by 'solidarity with the social interests of the poor and marginalized... also by the interpretative interests that constitute the scholarly communities in which we were trained and in which we are situated.'²⁸ This can be an uncomfortable position to inhabit yet it is also one in which creative tension brings new insights.

This different view of theological method shifts the power relationships normally present in Bible study. Bible study usually divides into two elements: an understanding of the text and its background and an application of the text to the context. Scholars often engage in both exegesis and interpretation. However, a teamwork approach to learning shares power where a group leader enables contributions from all to be valued; contextual and biblical knowledge make equal contributions. West recognizes, referring to his own work with poor communities, 'we did have resources which might be useful, provided we were willing to read the Bible and do theology "with" them.'²⁹ Ernesto Cardenal, a priest in Nicaragua, offered his Bible knowledge to a group of local poor farmers and fishermen, who met to talk about the Bible in the midst of conversations about their everyday lives.³⁰ Local people define their context and make their own connections, with biblical background material at the service of the group's agenda, rather than controlling it. Biblical scholars able to trust God's Spirit to work within a culture different from their own have an opportunity to stand in amazement as God reveals himself in new ways, with insights that can only be gained from those who experience life at the margins.

27 Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p 50.

28 Gerald West, *The Academy of the Poor*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1999, p 72.

29 West, *The Academy of the Poor*, p 35.

30 Ernesto Cardenal, *Love in Practice – the Gospel in Solentiname*, Search Press, London 1977, p 5.

This can be problematic for those in ministry in urban areas. They are working in a situation where a cultural tendency for some is deference to those in authority, and church members revere those with 'spiritual authority'. With a vicar, I visited a church neighbourhood group, which regularly meets together, to share their own news and news of the neighbourhood, and to reflect together on the Bible. Group members expressed to the vicar, 'You should have been here last week. We were struggling with the passage. We needed you to sort it out for us'. In fact, the week before, they had reached some reflections themselves with great insight, and yet were not confident that they had found the 'right answer'.³¹ The development of confidence in individuals and congregations is key in enabling a partnership approach to the Bible.

Vincent Wimbush has researched and analysed types of African-American readings of the Bible, from slavery to the present day. From an early 'combination of rejection, suspicion and awe of "Book Religion"' they moved to a point where 'African slaves began to appropriate and own the Bible – "transforming it from the book of the religion of whites... into a source of... power... of strong hopes"'.³² British urban people, likewise, have tended to reject or defer to middle class biblical expertise. I observed a small group of Christians on a housing estate, who had moved from this point to a place of their ownership of the Bible. They had developed their confidence to 'do theology', and realized that the most valuable contribution made by their minister was not his Biblical expertise ('we could have used a concordance') but the use of his large living room, as a space for the group to meet.

I recently engaged in research to discover the expertise of those who facilitate the use of the Bible in this way. It appears that the most important trait is attitude, learned through experiences of poverty, urban living, marginalization, or listening to those who have these experiences. This attitude is one of passionate motivation, and solidarity with the poor, with a belief that others can discover the revelations of the Holy Spirit for themselves. West describes his own development: 'For biblical scholars who do not come from poor and marginalized communities becoming socially engaged requires some form of conversion'.³³ Those who would facilitate urban theology in British inner cities and housing estates can learn much by listening to the urban poor. This attitude development is a life journey rather than a training course. Paul Taylor describes it as 'process-centred, not product-centred' education for the facilitators.³⁴

The Bible as a tool for domestication or liberation?

Juan Luis Segundo, the South American liberation theologian raises questions about these issues, identifying a contradiction between Barth's doctrine of faith 'that

31 See Jenny Richardson, 'You Can Keep Your Hat On!', Chris Rowland & John Vincent, eds, *Bible in Practice*, Urban Theology Unit, Sheffield 2001, pp 27-34.

32 West, *The Academy of the Poor*, pp 83-84 (West is citing p 84 of Vincent L. Wimbush, 'The Bible and African Americans: An

Outline of an Interpretative History', in Cain Hope Felder, ed., *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1991, pp 81-97).

33 West, *The Academy of the Poor*, p 36.

34 Paul V. Taylor, *The Texts of Paulo Freire*, Open University Press, Maidenhead, p 73.

redemption and salvation have been granted to all' and a view of salvation for a chosen minority. Segundo's view is that the church has 'tried to achieve liberative ends – by mass means that are intrinsically opposed to liberation, referring to these as everything that diminishes the person and turns him or her into a domesticated... being.' He asserts, 'This basic contradiction has run through the whole history of the Church. It has preached a personal, creative, heroic style of life on the one hand, while utilizing mass mechanisms to ensure a church membership that is equally mass oriented.' Segundo goes on to question: 'Was the original Christian message aimed at masses... or was it rather aimed at minorities who were destined to play an essential role in the transformation and liberation of the masses?'³⁵

He cites literacy training, through a competence-based approach, one that also might be labelled 'technological education'. Yvonne Craig, writing on methods of adult education, sees this exhibited in current employment based training in Britain.³⁶ This process trains a minority, who impart skill to the masses. Freire noticed that the education system did not work for the majority: they came out of school illiterate, they were not able to use their education and were powerless; they became cogs in a wheel; they could not do anything for themselves; they became apathetic. Segundo contrasts a competence based approach with Freire's problem solving approach to conscientization, where 'the person involved becomes an active subject rather than being merely a passive object of history', a process which increases life's complexity. Operating counter to the prevailing social climate means 'one must face more threats and sanctions from the social system that seeks to perpetuate itself; it is a 'high cost process. Segundo concludes, 'literacy training can be a mass process, but conscientization cannot. To push people towards situations that are more complex, difficult and intermediate is to create minorities'. Segundo goes on to ask, 'Which processes are proper to Christianity – those akin to literacy training or those akin to conscientization?'

This question about processes needs to be asked of those who use the Bible in the urban areas of Britain. Those who are responsible for theological education with the urban laity are faced with a choice between imposing theological understanding or offering their specialist biblical knowledge to enable local people to do their own theology – and perhaps come to surprising conclusions. There are questions of whether the church itself is part of the 'masses' or a minority. In industrial urban areas, the church is and always has been a minority with a gulf between urban life and the church.³⁷ The social exclusion of many in urban areas resonates with the social exclusion of the lepers and prostitutes who were Jesus' friends. Using the Bible in this culture, in the ways I have described, parallels Jesus' acceptance, affirmation and empowerment of those at the margins.

35 Juan Luis Segundo, *The Liberation of Theology*, translated by John Drury, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 1976, pp 208-216.

36 Yvonne Craig, *Learning for Life*, Mowbray, London pp 25ff.

37 A full exploration of the historical development of the church in industrial urban areas is beyond the scope of this paper.

Releasing the Bible

Theological education methods that are akin to conscientization can make a significant contribution, leading to change and transformation for urban Christians, and their neighbours. Similarities between some characteristics of pre- and postmodern culture may mean that insights into theological method, learned with marginalized urban communities, offer ways forward to the wider church, as it struggles with changes within society. Suggestions for the theological education of ordinands, which keep urban (and rural) issues as specialist areas for the few, rather than something for all to grapple with, will severely limit the contribution that could be made from Britain's urban parishes.³⁸

A challenge for the church is to take risks, to appreciate the cultural richness of those in British urban areas and to release the Bible as a vital and relevant document through which God communicates today.

Jenny Richardson was employed for 10 years with the Evangelical Urban Training Project/Unlock and was recently appointed as the Church Army's Staff Development Officer, based at the Wilson Carlile College of Evangelism. She taught at Greenbelt on urban issues in 2002.

38 Church of England, *Formation for Ministry in a Learning Church: The Structure and Funding for Ordination Training*, March 2003, para 6.19, p 74 (see <http://linkup.c-of-e.org.uk/ministry/safwp/index.htm>).