



BOOK REVIEW: 'AN OTHER KINGDOM' BY BLOCK, BRUEGGEMANN AND MCKNIGHT

Review of *An Other Kingdom: Departing the Consumer Culture*, by Peter Block, Walter Brueggemann and John McKnight, (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2016).

In *City of God* (412-426) Augustine wrestled with questions and accusation about the causes of the massive social and cultural collapse of Rome, which by the 5th century confronted the end of its great civilization and vast empire. What were the causes for this catastrophic transformation of the civil and social life and what were the ways ahead in an unknown future? In the midst of many responses, Augustine reframed the questions with a **theological imagination** and a deconstruction of the prevailing myths about Rome and its identity. He wrote of two cities, two kingdoms and, most importantly, about the locus of our desires in relationship to these two cities or kingdoms. Augustine's energies were directed to a **reframing of imagination and a reorientation of human desire in the**

midst of these two kingdoms. He was not painting some utopian alternative to Rome but providing an alternative way of seeing and living in the world where we see through a glass darkly.

Reading *An Other Kingdom* takes me back to Augustine's task. In its pages we read an important attempt to name the maladies of our time when faced with the ending of a certain Western narrative and the desperate need for an alternative imagination. In this sense it is an important book written with urgency. Like a tract it deconstructs the malaise of our time and offers an imagination for the reconstitution of social and cultural life in the West. It is to be applauded. Its proposals are important; they need to be taken seriously by any Christian desiring to faithfully live out the Gospel in these times; however, it misses the essential imagination that framed Augustine's project and directed his desires.

I look forward to the writings of Brueggemann, Block and McKnight. For some time now they have been collaborating around themes of the common good and the renewing of neighborhood around an emphasis on the local. They are eager to invite us away from the language of social contract and into the language of covenant. *An Other Kingdom* is a small, incisive tract setting out in clear, unambiguous terms the malaise of the West and what is at stake for us as Western societies. The beast to be slain is consumer capitalism. Just as there were informed elites in 5th century Rome who were clear about the causes of its fall (Christianity), so this book is equally clear about the root sources of our sickness. They are equally clear about the alternative. In its clarity about the sources of our sickness and our healing the book draws liberally from Biblical imagination and text. Indeed, page upon page is framed with quotes from the Scriptures. It is built around some of the most basic of Christian imagery. The invitation of the book, for example, harkens back to Israel's release from Egypt with its journey to another land (an other kingdom). The book is essentially calling for a new exodus. The biblical imagery is used to make clear the 'signs of the times' in terms of the fragility of our social life with its expanding levels of economic duress for so many of our citizens in the commons. At multiple points in their critique of consumer capitalism the book sounds forth like Old Testament prophets. The book is replete with Biblical imagery and supporting texts suggesting that the overall thrust of their proposal is rooted in Christian imagination.

The call to rediscover and remake a commons or to restore neighborliness goes deep into Christian imagination. An imagination that has, sadly, been lost in a world filled with self-actualizing individuals whose desires are to fulfill their own potential through consuming goods and services, including the religious. **The authors are right in their call for a change in the narratives of life from individuated consumption to a communally shaped covenanting with the other for the sake of the common good.** I share their conviction that the place where this must happen again is in the local. In the parlance of our time this is about a journey back into the local, a move back into something we once called neighborhood.

Journey is an image used in the book. Borrowing again from biblical resources, it is a journey to 'an other kingdom'. Kingdom language is filled with elemental forms of narrative imagination. It is not simply a place, though it involves place. It is about the realm of meaning and practice within which one lives. We could, for example, speak of the kingdom of consumer capitalism that is part of the book's

argument. Kingdom language is about the kind of story shaping our common life. It is about an ordering of life around a focused desire. **This book's invitation is for us to recognize the destructiveness of the kingdom shaped around the desire to consume and to get and how life giving is an 'other kingdom' shaped by the desire for community in the local, for the common good, rather than MY good.** In some wonderful chapters the authors play out the forms of desire and practices of life shaped by each kingdom. I agree and support the kind of journey they invite us onto. As I have written in several books, we must respond to this invitation to shape our lives around the common good. The neighborhood, neighborliness and a dwelling with the other are critical practices for the healing of the world.

That said, I have some serious reservations about the book.

First, while I agree that consumer capitalism is contributing massively to the malaise of our current social order it is misguided to see it as the 'kingdom' from which we must make an exodus journey to another land. A nexus of powerful structures and institutions interconnected and resourcing one another in a complex variety of ways are the basis of this malaise. Consumer capitalism isn't, by itself, the simple, clear, primary culprit. It isn't the 'Egypt' from which we must be delivered.^[1] Since the birth of the modern West a series of forces have come together to undermine and uproot all kinds of institutions and forms of life in the local. The fragility of common life is rooted in the structures and desires of modernity. The modern state with its powerful bureaucratizing and homogenizing structures, the powerful emergence of capitalism in its multiple forms, the massive technological revolutions and, above all else, the shaping of the expressive individual are together the forms and institutions of modern life that have created a context where the center no longer seems to hold and we grow increasingly fearful of the other and neighbor. This is not to say that the state, capitalism, technology and the individual have not been and continue to be great gifts to us. This is not to create an either/or, good/bad, right/wrong dichotomy. Surely there is much that has gone awry in these institutions, structures and forms of the modern West. Truly there is much that needs to be changed. But one wonders if the challenge we face might not lie elsewhere. Might the ways of addressing these systems, these principalities and powers lie in a different place and require a far deeper renovation?

In the modern West our experiences of the common good and life for one another in the local have been weakened by the revolutionary forces of the modern period. None of this happened over night but inside a long process of cultural change and amazing innovation in which the desires and practices of people were transformed and colonized by other desires. A romantic, idealized response to these transformations will not address the critical engagements that *An Other Kingdom* urgently seeks to invite. One suspects that part of what this book is inviting us to consider is how we might learn new ways of schooling our *desires* so that they are directed toward a common good and the other. Such schooling calls for the reconstitution of the local as the primary space where life is formed. Consumer capitalism is but one example of how our desires have become misdirected and in need of schooling. There is no easy either-or here.

There is a second, and more critical concern about this important book. The book is so filled with

Christian and Biblical imagery that I feel it is appropriate to acknowledge my own shaping within a Christian imagination. This is part of my appreciation for the book. For me, this invitation to journey to an 'other kingdom' is, at its root, an invitation to turn our desires toward God. It is at this juncture that I struggle with the book. Indeed, I would give it a subtitle to make my point: *The Usefulness of God*. Therein lies my dis-ease. In the words of Adam Seligman, modernity was a huge wager on the belief that life could be lived well without God.[2] In the place of God there came new, immanent forms and practices to govern life in the saeculum. These replacements promised to the citizens of the West not just their adequacy but their ability to create a new heaven on earth so long as we gave them our loyalty; so long as we lifted up their legitimacy and so long as we schooled our desires around them. In this sense the state, the economy, the self and technology became the ultimate sources of our hope and our desire to find the good life. They were neither good nor bad realities but they became the systems and narratives where our central desires migrated and were relocated.[3] Within this new nexus of modernity God still had a place. This place is what I would call God's *usefulness* (see p.13 in *An Other Kingdom*) in which God has become secondary to and a support for these other desires. In our time these modern structures and forms toward which our desires migrated are increasingly looking more and more destructive of human and earthly thriving. Our desires for them are being questioned but we do not know where now to look beyond ourselves. Hence, we are witnessing the beginning of a massive search for replacement desires. These replacement desires are seen in such things as a new environmentalism, a new asceticism[4] and a new conversation around the neighborhood and the common good. Please do not misread what is being stated here. Some of these new movements, migrations of desire, are important and must be applauded. But they remain desires within modernity's wager and they continue to undergird a narrative of God as useful. In this sense they remain fresh ways of making life work well, wherein God is brought in if that can be useful for the movement of these new desires. For a Christian, while participating in and blessing some of these movements is vital, it is also to miss the point of what's at stake in the healing of our society and world. This goes to the core of the question: **What is the/an other kingdom we desire?**

An Other Kingdom is an important book. It raises critical questions around what is at stake for us today. Its call and invitation is one we must hear and embrace. That being said I would point in some further directions for the shaping of a Christian imagination around this journey and this question of desiring the kingdom. As Augustine wrestled with these issues in the 5th century around the end of Rome I would commend to you the writing of a contemporary theologian, Graham Ward who has wrestled long and hard with this questions of Christian desire and witness in our time. Ward frames the challenge and the journey in these terms:

...the need for a reschooling, a rereading and rewriting of the Christian tradition in this instance... A true political theology can only commence with eschatology; for eschatology examines the God of history, the God in history...for a political theology begins with the sovereignty of the one God and the operations of that sovereignty in and across time. A Christian action is political not because it takes place within the polis and is implicated in the struggle for the city's soul...but because the God who acts in history is political and this God exercises authority, power, and judgement in order to establish a kingdom.[5]

The travail of our time calls Christians to a fundamental reschooling of desire and appetite. The local and everyday must become the locus for this work but more than anything else **the God we worship must be the primary agent and not just a useful assistant.**

[1] Metaphors are complicated, this 'Egypt' image no less than any other. The biblical story is not primarily about a 'journey' but deliverance. This deliverance requires something outside the people themselves. Even the idea of journey raises questions about the metaphor. The primary journey of the exodus is not about another land or kingdom but going to the mountain to worship God. This is not a small matter when we ask about the shape and practices for the healing of life in a pluralist society.

[2] Adam B. Seligman, *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self and Transcendence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).

[3] See William T. Cavanaugh's *Migration of the Holy* (Eerdmans, 2011) as one example of this in terms of the state.

[4] See Sarah Coakley, *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2015).

[5] Graham Ward, *The Politics of Discipleship: Becoming Postmaterial Citizens* (London: SCM Press, 2009) 166-167.



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