BOOK REVIEW

Dwight N. Hopkins and Marjorie Lewis, *Another World Is Possible: Spiritualities and Religions of Global Darker Peoples*. Equinox Publishing Ltd: London, 2009. 379 pp. £16.99. ISBN 978-1-84553-393-9.

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A little-known booklet was published back in 1955 with the title, *The People of Kenya Speak for Themselves* (Detroit, MI: Kenya Publications Fund). In it, the author, Mbiyu wa Koinange, sought to decry the fact that the colonialists in Kenya purported to speak for the Kenyan indigenous people to the extent that the then European governor of the country elected a fellow White to “represent” African interest in their legislative council.

*Another World Is Possible* is another such book. It is a book about and for the most part written by the voiceless peoples of the world; the people that contemporary social structures have consigned to the periphery of history. *Another World Is Possible* is an uncomfortable read. It at once holds a mirror before our very eyes of the world as it is and the world as it can and ought to be. Throughout the book, the voiceless from many and varying social-economic and political areas and backgrounds of the world are lent voice.

The book’s twenty-five chapters cover areas and issues that range from the so-called “untouchable ‘Dalits’ of India” (9), to the lost generation of indigenous Australians (55), the silent women who are sufferers of the dreaded HIV/AIDS in Africa (146), to the plight of the black communities in Cuba, Jamaica, and the Americas (264, 273, 293, 331). What do these far-flung peoples have in common? It is how their diverse social-cultural and religious heritage has sustained them in the face of debilitating social, religious, and political structures.

Musa Dube employs the concept of “HIV Positive Feminisms” (146ff.) to wage a spirited war against the forces of patriarchy, racism, sexism, ethnic cleansing, colonialism, and religious intolerance that have denied women who have been infected with HIV/AIDS the care and social affirmation that they require from their respective African societies.

Anthony Reddie in his piece entitled, “Theology, Violence and the ‘Other’,” reflects not only on his experiences as the only five-year old Black child in his primary school being taunted by a large group of White pupils, but also on countless others who have suffered racial epithets in Judeo-Christian Britain and elsewhere.
For example, he opines that, “When Christianity has insisted on parading human constructions as metaphysical, essentialized truth, this has often led to the reification of aesthetics and conventions of the powerful; whilst marginalizing and oppressing those outside the traditional hegemonies that govern” (99). And almost in the tradition of Martin Luther King Jr, Reddie wistfully writes “I long for a day when my black body will not attract any racist action from white authority when I am going about my lawful business in my own country” (105). Martin Luther King Jr had similarly longed for a day when his four little children would not be judged by the colour of their skin but the content of their character (March on Washington DC speech, August 28, 1963).

It is also instructive to note how symbols can be contested to give the required meaning. Whereas, for example, the Christian symbols have often been appropriated by the powerful to oppress those on the margins of society, Teruo Kuribayashi, writing on the three million Burakimini “outcasts” of Japanese society, demonstrates how Christian concepts of “martyrdom” and “suffering” (33) are rendered by this community as symbols that express “their pain, their groaning and their long history of oppression” (36). Paradoxically though, the genius of the Burakimini is not to be tied to symbols of any one religion. Besides the Christian symbols, they will easily use Buddhist and Marxist terms to recall and interpret their experience of the past and to express hope in the future. In other words, the Burakimini will use whatever symbols that can be co-opted to advance their social-political liberation. Jesus’ crown of thorns, for example, has become for the Burakimini “a symbol representing in an oppressive world, the kingdom of freedom and justice to come” (40).

The Cuban case speaks volumes about many of the socially marginalized peoples when Luis Chasbar, quoting Maria Selete, insightfully observes that being Black is at once to experience “one’s own identity being denied,” but also at the same time and above all to experience committing oneself to “rescue the history and re-inventing of oneself in its potentiality” (254).

The voices in Another World Is Possible are not just a lament over a pitiful and hopeless situation but a clarion call for the down-trodden to rediscover their respective histories, rescue their social memories, and change their situations. Thus through “Eco-feminism and Yoruba Religion in Cuba: A Proposal for Inter-Religious Dialogue,” Chasbar presents a spirituality that is a hybrid of the African Traditional (Yoruba) Religion and Judeo-Christian. She calls on Afro-Cubans to gain African wisdom through which they will learn how Black communities “produce their own knowledge, talk about themselves, present and express themselves through concrete ‘forms of life’” (257). In sum, Chasbar, writing in a manner that echoes Paul’s concept of a groaning creation (Romans 8), writes, “In such turbulent times when it is not about change but loss of paradigm” it “is a challenge for theologians to listen, to make room for science, to know how to bow before the mystery…the mystery that is life, the mystery that is God” (257). According to the author, inter-religious dialogues must focus on the protection of our planet. And she fittingly concludes, “This is no time to limit God to concepts that have nothing to do with God” (257).
It is not possible to critically present all the excellent pieces found in this book. I have reviewed a cross section of articles drawn from different regions. Nevertheless, we would do ourselves a disservice if we did not pay attention to the astute and scholarly mind of Lewis Williams to whose blessed memory this book is dedicated. In his article, “Social Conditions and Spiritual Solutions in the Caribbean,” Williams addresses the social malaise that has bedevilled the whole of Jamaica. Employing the Hebrew words for righteousness, meaning to do the right thing to one another and repairing the breach created by people doing the wrong thing to one another, he calls not just for national but also international “righteousness” and “justice.” Williams aptly decries the perennial problems of colonialism and neocolonialism which today finds expressions through the postmodern name, globalization. While not sparing the usual suspects, especially the United States of America, Williams is wise enough to know that our solutions need to be home-grown. He castigates the church leaders who, instead of being involved in the geo-political debates about who controls and directs the resources and policies of Jamaica, are hell bent in their “name it and claim it” prosperity gospel (275).

The last article in this volume is by Dwight N. Hopkins and is entitled “Black Christian Worship: Theological and Biblical Foundations.” Hopkins informs us that when Black congregations gather to worship, the goal is to praise and thank God for what God has done. Nevertheless, the content of worship is individual healing and social transformation. This worship, according to Hopkins, calls for “full bodily engagement” for the people to be able to affirmatively say “Chile, we had church today” (332). In sum, Black worship is characterized by the role of the preachers, the dynamics of the Sunday service, and the presence of the Holy Spirit. But the Black church is not like the typical Western Judeo-Christian synagogue or church. Because the preacher, for example, is an amalgam of imageries of traditional African King/Queen, African personages, and African griots who are custodians and reciters, if not performers of social history (335). Sunday worship itself is a serious, if sometimes theatrical, vibrancy of emotions which engage the body, mind, spirit, and intellect. Through this “performance” the worshipers ask the Holy Spirit to be present in their worship (337).

The strength of Another World Is Possible lies in its ability to draw from authentic native voices. The book gives voice to a whole cross-section of the marginalized communities around the world and the articles are written by the indigenous peoples themselves who have been and are presently living in that particular social history of degradation. Hence, we have an opportunity to hear first-hand the voiceless of history and share in their pain. There is nothing better than hearing people articulate their own situation.

My concern has to do with the brevity of some of the articles, which in my view limits the discourse. Most of the articles in the book merely expose a problem but are not long enough to analyse historical contexts and/or propose a sustained solution to systemic problems.

The other glaring omission is that certain prominent “voiceless” of history are absent in this “mix” of the voiceless. I mention the case of the Gypsies popularly known as the Travellers and the Native-Americans. In Europe the Travellers have
become quite “visible” with their many camp-sites in England, for instance. The Gypsies have their own distinct way of life, way of worship, as well as their own cultural spaces. It would have been wonderful to have added the Traveller’s voice in this plethora of “voices.”

The Native-Americans are also conspicuously absent. It is gratifying that the Hawaiian situation was brought into the mix (77). Nevertheless, whereas the Hawaiian and the Black American issues emanate from the same social geographical location as the Native-Americans, the latter’s situation is conspicuously absent. It would have been important to hear an American-Indian articulate their own social history of subjugation and oppression by invading European forces and the gallant resistance put up by native Americans.

The American-Japanese plight during the Second World War and the Jewish debacle at the hands of Hitler cogently remind us that the so-called “fringe” communities live in tenuous spaces. The Japanese-Americans were rounded up and put into concentration camps by their own government when the war broke in 1943. In the case of the Jews, Hitler sought to exterminate and indeed killed as many as six million of them, their German citizenship notwithstanding. The so-called fringe communities are never and must never feel at home until they have fought their way to the middle of their society’s socio-political and economic decision-making processes. The human spirit is as evil as it can be angelic. The history of human beings is replete with mechanism of clever social exclusion and discrimination. Those who live on the margins cannot therefore afford to relax their demand for their inalienable rights. Power concedes nothing except by demand, and these communities’ dignity, respect, and fair play will never be handed to them on a platter; they must demand it!

On the whole, we are better educated about how it is with the world because of this excellent volume. I commend it to all who yearn for and work for the possibility of a just and egalitarian world.