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HOW TO BE A PROPHET?

NADIA MARZOUKI

Public Books, 15/03/2022

Books review : *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America*, by Anthea Butler and *American Prophets: The Religious Roots of Progressive Politics and the Ongoing Fight for the Soul of the Country*, by Jack Jenkins

On August 20, 2020, the last day of the Democratic National Convention, Sister Simone Campbell, the executive director of NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, delivered a prayer to the delegates. Wearing a blouse with blue flower motifs and an optimistic smile, she invited her audience to fight for “a vision that ends structural racism, bigotry and sexism.” Not even a week later, Sister Deirdre Byrne, a surgeon and retired colonel in the U.S. Army Medical Corps, gave a more somber speech at the Republican National Convention. Clad in a long black veil and black religious habit, she sternly contended that the “largest marginalized group in the world can be found here in the United States” and that “they are the unborn.” She described Donald Trump as “the most pro-life president this nation has ever had, defending life at all stages.” The juxtaposition of these two speeches embodies—almost to the point of parody—just how much the culture war has shaped (and been shaped by) American Christianity.

The two sisters’ showdown is just one example of the countless controversies over whether and how religion should contribute to struggles for social and racial justice. Pundits’ and politicians’ calls to return to the gospel, Bible verses battles, and references to “what would Jesus say” have become daily features of the US public disputes around good and bad religion. Fortunately, the way that religion is enmeshed with the politics of social and racial justice is discussed in two recent books, *White Evangelical Racism*, by Anthea Butler, and *American Prophets*, by Jack Jenkins. Both contributions are refreshing; together, they add up to a mutually enriching analysis of the polarization of religious politics in the US.

Each book approaches the question of American religion by looking at radically opposed groups, histories, and movements. Butler lucidly synthesizes the history of American evangelicals and how they colluded with racist theologies and policy. Jenkins, meanwhile, investigates the strategies of the religious left. Both books contribute a much-needed and innovative perspective to the now-massive literature on “Why evangelicals vote for Trump.” Butler insists on the need to decenter the public’s attention from the Trump moment and shows how the evangelical support for nativist and populist policy largely predates the 2016 election. Jenkins’s book offers a rich study of some of the more prominent American faith-based social justice movements today. Both books share an underlying assumption: that there is or should be in the US something akin to good religion, and that good religion has been hijacked by Christian nativists. This needs to be interrogated in light of a fundamental question that underlies their analyses: What could prophetic work look like today?

The category of “prophetic” in US political history contrasts with other religious phenomena, such as religious nativism and scriptural fundamentalism. Those who have experienced religion in such a prophetic form include Frederick Douglass, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Martin Luther King, Jr.; what they articulated was a discourse that speaks to “a people who live with their backs against the wall.” Prophetic speech aims both at a moral awakening of the targeted audience and at a disruption of established powers in the name of social justice.

Through an uncompromising history of evangelicals’ espousal of a racist ideology and a study of how progressive faith-based movements oppose the religious right, Butler and Jenkins respectively provide stimulating answers to the question of what role prophets may have in today’s US politics. Butler’s work can be read as a prophetic call, summoning salvageable evangelicals to see the truth about their history and identity. Jenkins’s book is an invitation for religious left movements to think more strategically about their prophetic goals.

Both studies situate the most pressing tasks for prophetic activism today within the framework of the US nation-state and the hegemonic left/right political divide. Butler provides a history of the connection between white evangelicalism and the exceptionalist and nationalist approaches to the American nation-state. Yet she refrains from articulating an alternative way of thinking of religion and politics beyond the US nation-state. The rationale underlying many of the faith-based progressive movements described in Jenkins’s book is that these movements are better suited than their evil counterpart on the right to “fight for the soul of the country” (to quote from Jenkins’s subtitle). One may question, then, the tendency of many of the faith-based projects constituting the American religious left to reproduce—or at least refrain from questioning—the same nationalist and exceptionalist framework. Good or bad, right or left, the very category of religion ultimately seems thinkable only within the framework of the American nation-state.

Should prophets concern themselves with saving the soul of the nation? The two books indirectly reveal that the toxic impact of US Christian white supremacy far exceeds its concrete translations into structures of social and racial exploitation. It also hinders the possibility of imagining alternative forms of freedom and community outside of the narrow nationalist and US-centered framework that the Christian right imposes. Theologian Walter Brueggemann¹ has demonstrated that what makes a prophet, in addition to their ability to translate a unique empathy with the suffering of marginalized communities into collective action, is their ability to imagine counternarratives to the scripts imposed by a hegemonic culture. A question that derives from both books, then, is how to escape the repetitive process whereby each religious side outbids the other in their claim to represent good religion, understood as good American religion.

Anthea Butler’s study distinguishes itself from the vast number of recent books that similarly address evangelicals’ entwinement with racism by the type of history she tells and the way she approaches evangelicals’ agency. Hers is not a feel-good history of decadence and decay in which naïve faithful have been misled by corrupt ideological leaders. White evangelicalism didn’t become racist over the years. Racism, Butler reveals, did not accidentally appear in its history.

In the first chapter, Butler establishes how racism was integral to antebellum America's evangelicalism and continued to inform its various re-elaborations until the constitution of the Christian right as a political force in the 1970s and up until today. From the beginning, Butler insists, racism gave shape to how evangelicals interpreted the scriptures. Their two favorite excerpts from the Bible (Genesis 9:18–27 and Ephesians 6:5–7) helped them to justify the enslavement of people of African descent. For Butler, the intertwining of racism and evangelicalism in the antebellum era has continued to inform evangelicals' propensity to maintain purity and (white) order through racial discrimination and violence, from their opposition to the civil rights movement to their justification of police violence against Black bodies in the present.

Linking racist ideology with evangelical theology has mostly manifested through the manipulation of morality. Evangelicals have successfully inverted their justification for racial violence into a so-called defense of order and purity. Butler refers to Charles Reagan Wilson's idea of the Religion of the Lost Cause to explain how evangelicals after the Civil War continuously ignored the suffering of Black people and manufactured the chivalresque ideal of the Southern life of secessionists as a sort of lost golden age. They built around this myth a series of rituals and symbols that consolidated the linkage between evangelicalism and white nativism.

Evangelicals' obsession with purity and (white) order, Butler argues, also expresses an old resentment at mainline Protestant denominations. "They could barely call themselves white Anglo-Saxon Protestants before the rise of Billy Graham. They longed for the institutions and prestige that the tall-steeple-church pastors had." The originality of Butler's take on the evangelical politics of purity lies in her subtle analysis of some evangelicals' strategy of respectability regarding racial justice. She crafts the term "Evangelical gentility" to describe how someone like Graham pretended to recognize racial injustice but was ultimately "unwilling to break ranks with the white status quo." Similarly, the Southern Baptist Convention apologized in 1995 for the tradition's racist history; Butler wonders about the lack of genuine effect of such an apology on restitution and structural change.

White Evangelical Racism begins and ends with a call to evangelicals of conscience to face their history. "I hope these words find root in you ... I hope they sear your soul. I hope they make you change." Even though Butler reminds the reader that she left evangelicalism when she was a graduate student, these words situate the book in the prophetic tradition of speaking truth to power and admonishing the sinful.

Anthea Butler is very clear that she is not interested herself in fixing evangelicalism. Even so, her remonstrance raises a crucial question. Is reforming evangelicalism—in other words, constructing good religion—a desirable and effective objective in working for social and racial justice?

The contemporary prophets whom Jack Jenkins examines in his book are undoubtedly committed to reforming and reclaiming religion from the distorted use made by right-wing evangelicals. The religious left field, according to Jenkins, includes groups as diverse as

Justice and Witness Ministries; the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival; the Reconciling Ministries Network; and the New Sanctuary Movement.

Jenkins uses the term prophet in a broad way to describe faith-based progressive activists who claim some connection to the US prophetic history of movement leaders, social reformers, and activists who drew on religious values to mobilize for social and racial justice. When he first introduces the term, he adds a caveat: "Not that many of the interfaith activists in that tent would have used that phrase to describe themselves, of course." His goal is not to delve into an analysis of the meanings of prophecy but to demonstrate that the religious left "is one of the Left's most secret of weapons and has the potential to impact US politics for years to come." For more precise definitions of prophetic politics, he simply refers to Albert Raboteau's previously published and similarly entitled *American Prophets*.

The groups that Jenkins is interested in resist easy definition. The label "religious left" describes "an amorphous, ever-changing group of progressive, faith-based advocates, strategists, and political operatives." It is pluralistic and heterogeneous, decentralized and fragmented. It is not necessarily—and if so, only loosely—related to a specific church, and its activities often merge with those of secular groups.

For Jenkins, what unites religious left activists beyond their many differences is a shared commitment to social justice action rooted in their faith. Although it is fragmented and decentralized, the religious left draws on a specific grammar and aesthetic of collective action that Jenkins refers to as the "poetry of protest," i.e., "the telling of a moral story through the medium of direct action, ... a sonnet with interchangeable verses but always the same refrain." This refrain includes three steps: an initial demonstration that organizers dramatize to attract media attention; an extension of the appeal to the moral cause at stake among the broader public; and (ideally) legislative or policy change as a result of these mobilizations.

One of the most important takeaways of Jenkins's book is that the religious left, no matter how heterogeneous and diverse it is, is not a disparate group of romantic loners or aspiring prophets. For its leaders, organizers, and activists, prophetic thinking—in the sense of an emancipatory and disruptive call for social justice, based on the scriptures—is inseparable from strategic thinking.

What does such a union of prophecy and strategy look like? The first chapter offers a detailed analysis of how Barack Obama's staffers and advisers understood faith as a key element of the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns. As a testament to the religious left's capacious political influence, Jenkins argues that the Affordable Care Act would not have passed without the lobbying and brokering of the religious left. Advocacy work from faith-based progressive groups played a key role in persuading reluctant members of Congress and raising awareness among the broader public. Sister Campbell's national campaign, *Nuns on the Bus*, is an example of this effort to change hearts and minds around health care justice. Jenkins refers to Sister Campbell as "a lobbyist's lobbyist; it's just that she happens to be a Catholic nun of the Sisters of Social Service."

Jenkins's book shows how most of the religious left's debates about strategy come down to one central quandary: how to counter the religious right while disavowing it as a blueprint. Religious left groups claim to be eager to reappropriate faith and reclaim a space that has been unduly conquered by the religious right. There is a real temptation to adopt the very strategies of the groups they seek to combat. In fact, though their objective and message may vary, they have employed similar strategies, as Ruth Braunstein's² comparative study of faith-based movements on the right and the left shows.

Consider the early stage of Obama's 2008 campaign. Jenkins explains that Obama lamented that community groups on the left lacked the organizing capacity of the Moral Majority. The campaign's faith-based outreach cited the methods of the religious right as a counterexample. "The trick was trying to do it in a way that wasn't like the Religious Right—co-opting pulpits," Joshua DuBois, the religious affairs director for Obama's 2008 campaign, explains. Despite a declared intent to avoid modeling its strategy on the religious right, the Obama faith outreach was based on an instrumental approach to faith that mainly aimed to gain more votes. "Faith outreach," Jenkins sums up, "like most elements of the famously data-driven 2008 Obama campaign, was part of a larger strategy that was ultimately all about votes." Since 2016, the call to reclaim voters among evangelicals or "exvangelicals" has been a refrain by progressive advocacy groups. The religious left is indeed ambivalent toward the religious right, a political force that it both emulates and loathes.

A question that emerges from both Butler's prophetic call to evangelicals of conscience and Jenkins's speculation about strategy is whether the normative quest for good religion is relevant in contemporary political struggles. Scholars have offered ample evidence that white evangelicalism has been a consistent force of racial violence and exclusion. But does this mean that the alternative should be found within the framework of good religion? To paraphrase Eric Lincoln's comment that "black religion is not simply white religion in blackface,"³ prophetic politics does more than translate some of the norms of right-wing white evangelicalism into a language acceptable to progressives while in fact maintaining the status quo.

Discussions of the US politics of religion today would benefit from an interrogation of the type of work that concepts such as "progressive" and even "prophetic" do. To what extent have such categories gained a constraining and disciplining meaning that they didn't have in the 1960s? Winnifred Sullivan's latest book, *Church State Corporation: Construing Religion in US Law*, offers a compelling analysis of how the category of prophetic religion is mobilized in discussions around the rehabilitation of Black prisoners in today's America. Her study of the policy and academic discourse at the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary at the Louisiana State Penitentiary specifically, and in prison churches more broadly, shows the pitfalls of the normative celebration of the benefit of the "right kind of religion" on Black inmates. "The claim that a pro-social gospel can change lives," she writes, "ignores the history of theology and church history and forgets the always tragic histories of projects of Christian civilization."

In a recent eulogy for Rep. John Lewis, Reverend Barber, co-chair of the Poor People's Campaign, drew a clear distinction between progressive and prophetic: "To see Lewis as a prophet in the biblical sense is to acknowledge how his life reveals not only the hypocrisy of

politicians but also the limitations of today's progressive movements." Barber recalled the timidity with which progressive leaders often welcomed the proposals that Lewis had put forward: "Even within the movement, Lewis was a prophet, always pushing us to not let our horizon of possibility be eclipsed by the harsh realism of a broken world." In other words, not only does progressive activism sometimes act as an obstacle to prophetic work, but the category of the prophetic itself can be appropriated by disciplinary forms that seek to construct a good liberal secular subjectivity.

The key question then is: Under what conditions can the prophetic keep its prophetic power and avoid being recuperated and reduced by a good religion/bad religion discourse? How can prophetic work take place beyond pastoral modes of subjectivation to good religion? And how may we account for the specific history of US white evangelical racism while addressing contemporary politics of race and religion in the US beyond the paradigms of resistance, reaction, and reclaiming? Might it be that what is needed, rather than a discourse of reclaiming (from right-wing evangelical racists), is a radical reorientation toward imagining alternative forms of community and solidarity that are not wedded to the very template we want to reject? In the words of religious studies scholar Charles H. Long, "those who were oppressed in the modern period cannot hope that they will experience liberation in the terms of these continuities of freedom. In the case of the Africans enslaved in the Americas, they must 'go back into the water' for a reorientation."⁴

The remarkable resonance of the protests for George Floyd in the summer of 2020 throughout Europe and the Middle East is testimony to the need to think about the struggles against racism and nativism in a more interconnected and less US-centered way. It also points to the need to be attentive to the emergence of forms of profane, sacred, and prophetic engagement across the world—from Gaza to Ferguson, and from Beirut to Paris—that have nothing to do with the pastoral quest for good religion.

This article was commissioned by Matthew Engelke

1. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress Press, 2018).
2. Ruth Braunstein, *Prophets and Patriots: Faith in Democracy across the Political Divide* (University of California Press, 2017).
3. *The Black Experience in Religion*, edited by C. Eric Lincoln (Anchor, 1974).
4. Charles H. Long, *The Collected Writings of Charles H. Long: Ellipsis* (Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 206.