

## **Thick or Thin? Liberal Protestant Public Theology**

Vincent Lloyd

Key Words: activism, community organizing, witness, mainline Protestants, social justice, praxis

### Books Reviewed

Luke Bretherton. 2010. *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Jennifer M. McBride. 2012. *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Helene Slessarev-Jamir. 2011. *Prophetic Activism: Progressive Religious Justice Movements in Contemporary America*. New York: New York University Press.

C. Melissa Snarr. 2011. *All You That Labor: Religion and Ethics in the Living Wage Movement*. New York: New York University Press.

Theologically liberal Christians, and particularly liberal Protestants, struggle to offer a distinctive political vision. On policy issues, denominational lobbying offices often advocate the same position as secular liberal advocacy groups. Liberal theology seems to go with liberal politics, at most adding the language of love, justice, and morality to policy discussions – or,

cynically, the words “love,” “justice,” and “morality.” Just as there has been a recent resurgence of interest in the historiography of liberal Protestantism, there is now a growing body of scholarship offering resources for liberal Protestants to thicken their political theological perspective. Some of this scholarship focuses on concrete practices of organizing and activism, some of it draws on currents in evangelical and Catholic thought, and some of it taps German Protestant resources. In general, this scholarship finds theological resources in praxis first, secondarily turning to dialogue with tradition and to conceptual analysis.

The convergence between theological and political liberalism in the United States results in part from the way their histories run together. David Chappell (2003) persuasively argues that in the mid-twentieth century New Deal liberalism and anti-Communism neatly complemented the grand public theological voice of Reinhold Niebuhr, with spiritually infused pragmatism keeping a foot in both camps. This comfortable alignment was disrupted by the Civil Rights Movement’s refusal of liberal politics, energized by quite different religious visions than those of (white) liberal Protestantism. But the disruption did not last for long. By the 1980s, the blend of African American Protestantism and racial justice activism synthesized in the Civil Rights Movement was incorporated into both theological liberalism and political liberalism. The “beloved community” proclaimed by Martin Luther King, Jr., meant both a political vision of social justice and a theological vision of all-inclusive love.

Occasional attempts have been made to renew a prophetic theological voice echoing that of the Civil Rights Movement, but in the contemporary cultural and religious landscape these often exemplify, rather than complicate, the convergence of theological and political liberalism. “Moral Mondays,” led by North Carolina NAACP President Rev. Dr. William Barber II, a Disciples of Christ minister and a Duke Divinity School and Drew Theological School alumnus,

have mobilized thousands of activists for weekly protests, with hundreds arrested. Branded as a movement of “religious progressives,” with ministers and theology students in the front lines, Moral Mondays garnered wide support among the mainline denominations. Leaders of these denominations issued a statement asserting that their support “is not an act of political partisanship” but rather “is a matter of faith with respect to our understanding of the biblical teachings and imperatives to protect the poor, respect the stranger, care for widows and children and love our neighbors” (North Carolina Council of Churches 2013). They concluded, “We speak and act in love and through our understanding that our first citizenship is in the Kingdom of God, and we do so always as faithful citizens of the democratic process.”

However, the protesters lacked a unified, or distinctively theological, vision, instead responding to a range of initiatives advanced by North Carolina’s Republican legislature, from anti-abortion legislation to voting rights restrictions to budget cuts. The religious leaders’ statement simply calls the topic of the protest “moral issues.” That these “moral issues” precisely map onto the issues pushed by the state Republican leadership can hardly be coincidence. The theological backing offered by the mainline leaders – the imperative to protect the poor, the stranger, widows, and children – is not particularly imaginative, and does not invite a reconsideration of the Christian’s public role in the world. In short, the worry about the “Moral Monday” protests, like the worry about liberal Protestant public theology today, is that theology does not transform a political vision; it merely supports a political position defined by the partisan battles of the day. It is comfortable, allowing those who use it and those who hear it to feel affirmed in their already existing convictions. In other words, what the evocative statement by the denominations that “our first citizenship is in the Kingdom of God” actually means is not fleshed out, and the otherness seemingly entailed by the statement does not disrupt.

This worry is what motivates the scholarly development of “thick theology” for liberal Protestants, of a set of concepts and images that cannot be so easily dismissed as supervening on the secular.<sup>1</sup> An open, much debated question is the extent to which such thick theology can be heard in the contemporary secularist, pluralist public square. The debate was once characterized, or caricatured, by two extreme positions: that religious reasons ought to be translated into secular reasons for public discussion and that Christians, as “resident aliens,” ought to ignore public discussion. This debate is now largely resolved, at least in religious studies circles, with a consensus around the legitimacy of religious reasons in public as long as those reasons are grounded in tradition, together with the legitimacy of the immanent critique of those reasons (Stout 2004). Recent scholarship has offered examples of how such well-grounded religious reasons can be advanced on issues including environmental protection and gay marriage (Jenkins 2008; Rogers 1999). Such views, whether developed by insiders or outsiders to a tradition, ought to be persuasive for members of a community, and contestable by both community members and outsiders. A better account of Aquinas’s views about marriage that suggests he would support gay marriage should persuade Catholics to reconsider their views, for example. This response to secularism and religious pluralism makes space for thick theology to have a role in public discourse, not just in isolated religious communities.

Allowing religious reasons in public debate is one thing; allowing religion in public action is quite another. While the conversation about the role of religion in politics has been characterized by a level of abstraction, focused on exchanging reasons in a laboratory version of the public square, now it is moving to praxis, to the concrete realities of politics in motion, particularly from the bottom up. Moving from ideas to action also means moving from religious

---

<sup>1</sup> The books under review speak to a liberal Protestant audience, though they are not explicitly by and for liberal Protestants.

reasons to religious vision or imagination, requiring different sorts of disciplinary resources to be brought to bear in scholarship. Ethnography and social movement studies become more important than the tools of analytic philosophy. What matters, as the prerequisite for constructive work, is how lives are lived together and how worlds are envisioned together, not which arguments can be marshaled. From this perspective, thick theology need not be thick because of the density of references to the authoritative texts of a tradition. Thickness can come from explicating a rich world of religious images, practices, and ideas, interwoven, and capable of being mobilized for public action. (It will be interesting to see how the teachings of Pope Francis fit into such an account of “thick” theological liberalism).<sup>2</sup>

This sort of approach to religion in public life is more familiar, and more comfortable, when it is exotic religions at issue rather than our own – where “our own,” in the context of religious studies scholarship in the United States, always means hegemonic mainline Protestantism regardless of who we are. The ethically-interested, ethnographically-based scholarship of Saba Mahmood (2004) and Charles Hirschkind (2006) on Islamic worlds in Egypt offers a prime example, and one that is increasingly influential in religious studies circles. Mahmood and Hirschkind find Islamic public theology not in high culture, in the religious arguments and appeals to tradition of elites, but rather from below, in the everyday practices and organizations of Cairo residents. Scholarship on evangelical theology and practice in the United States, including on the evangelical left, is flourishing. But it is only now that the resources turned outwards are being turned inwards, to the Protestant mainline.

Approaching from the opposite direction, from the inside, from those Christian theologians in the US reflecting on theology in public life, we find robust discussions from

---

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Ottati’s recent work (2013), while presenting a “thick” theology for liberal Protestants, does so in a more traditional manner, without prioritizing praxis.

evangelical and Catholic (or Anglo-Catholic) quarters, enlivened by the charismatic figures of Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank (see Pinches 2008). Yet these discussions of virtue, tradition, and community, which have gradually begun to filter into liberal Protestant theological discourse, are often at a distance from the practices of actual existing communities (a notable, if partial, exception is Hauerwas and Coles 2008). Moreover, they are often at a distance from actual existing politics (as opposed to ethics). Even when they are not read as advocating Christian cultural isolation, and instead as advocating something closer to a call to conversion away from the endemic sins of secular modernity, it remains an open question how the thickness of these theological resources can be retained when, say, working in coalition to pass health care reform legislation. Is the only possibility to thin the theology: to choose just a few Christian words, those that are likely to garner the broadest appeal among non-Christians? But once theology has been thinned, once secular ideas and images have been embraced, is the theology motivating the political engagement or does the political engagement begin to motivate the theology?

### 1. Thin Prophecy

“Moral Mondays” do not emerge *ex nihilo*. They are part of a constellation of social justice activism catalyzed by parachurch organizations. When the political left, fearful of the “religious right” in the wake of the George W. Bush presidency, longed for its own “religious left,” it did not need to look to Barack Obama. It could have looked to the grassroots, where religious individuals and communities were already active in organizing for social justice. This landscape is mapped by Helene Slessarev-Jamir in *Prophetic Activism*. She offers an overview of workers’ rights organizing, immigrant rights organizing, peace movements, and global justice

activism. In addition to providing a map of current religiously-inflected work on these issues, she offers historical narratives about how that map came into place.

Slessarev-Jamir does not claim to be telling a story about liberal Protestant political activism or public theology. Quite the opposite: she identifies an idea at the core of the social justice activism of all religions, and she finds that this shared idea makes it possible for religious groups to work together on social justice issues, for example in congregation-based community organizing initiatives. That core idea she labels the prophetic: an affirmation of “the sacred and reciprocal quality of all human life, out of which flowed a call to do justice to the *other*” (5). Slessarev-Jamir points to texts and traditions within Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism that affirm this notion of the prophetic. Scholars of religion will be suspicious of such an approach, so reminiscent is it of the “world religions” scholarship of an earlier era that sought to identify some core characteristics shared by all religions (McCutcheon 1997; Masuzawa 2005). The critique of that “world religions” scholarship would seem to apply equally to the “prophetic” as defined by Slessarev-Jamir: in short, it accepts liberal Protestant commitments and reduces every other tradition into a liberal Protestant base, with distinctive ideas and practices as superstructure. Indeed, Slessarev-Jamir’s definition of the prophetic sounds suspiciously similar to the Unitarian Universalist principles: to “affirm and promote” “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” “acceptance of one another,” “respect for the interdependent web of all existence,” and “justice, equity and compassion in human relations.” While Slessarev-Jamir finds in the “multireligious nature of prophetic activism” an antidote to the Christian triumphalism undergirding American empire, one worries that post-Protestantism (or, crypto-Protestantism) may be even more complicit in American empire than imperial politics that make their theological commitments explicit, and so open for debate.

Sometimes, Slessarev-Jamir's definition of the prophetic expands to include additional elements, though it is unclear whether or not she considers these essential. She writes that the prophetic brings with it hope for "an altered future in which human relationships to one another and the natural world are repaired" (4), which she describes as "a means of holding together a common vision in the mist of what can easily become tense diversity" (67). It is hard not to read this account of eschatology as strikingly Christian. Further, she claims that the prophetic includes "commitment to nonviolent social change" that draws on the legacy of Gandhi and the Civil Rights Movement. Yet the relationship of nonviolence to, say, immigrant or global justice organizing seems opaque. Such contexts are infused with violence, and a commitment to a vision of future peace and justice might very well mean interventions that involve themselves in this violence. For example, nonviolence does not seem to capture the dilemmas involved in taking undocumented immigrants to a hospital where they will be treated but arrested (144). Adjudicating this sort of difficult question is precisely where an appeal to thick theology would provide at least a way of orienting oneself to the dilemma that is neither overly near-sighted, focusing on the short-term advances that sacrifice moral clarity, nor overly far-sighted, wallowing in visions of the *eschaton* while enabling injustices in the present.

In her account of the various domains of religiously motivated social justice activism, Slessarev-Jamir interviews participants and reviews activist literature as well as secondary literature. She concludes, in each case, that the religious motivation in question can be reduced to her account of the prophetic. In other words, she concludes that thin theology is at work, and she implicitly concludes that liberal Protestantism is hegemonic. Or, read through a hermeneutics of suspicion, she implicitly concludes that theology adds nothing to the social justice movements in question besides religious words which are used pragmatically to lend the movements a sense of



cultural authority and to mobilize religious potential supporters. There is nothing about these social justice issues, as opposed to other social justice issues, that particularly motivates religious participation; they just happen to be social justice issues around which there is currently momentum, and so religious communities have also mobilized in support of them.

For example, in her chapter on “Religious Organizing for Worker Justice,” Slessarev-Jamir begins with an overview of the injustices faced by workers in the contemporary US coupled with a sketch of the decline of the labor movement and the rise of a class of those especially vulnerable: immigrants workers. Into this background she weaves the response of religiously-inflected activists: Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers, historically, and in the present moment Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) as well as Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), the particularly vibrant Los Angeles IWJ affiliate. These latter two groups exemplify the inter-religious, prophetic activism at the heart of Slessarev-Jamir’s book. “The IWJ’s interreligious collaborations are primarily among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Even though most of its activists are Christians, IWJ hires a religiously diverse staff, maintaining both prominent Jewish and Muslim board members, and invites leaders from a broad array of religious traditions to serve as keynote speakers at its public events” (112). Further, Slessarev-Jamir notes that IWJ has produced “study materials on the different religions’ foundational understandings of worker justice as well as material that can be used in Christian, Jewish, and Muslim worship settings” (112). Public events put on by CLUE include rituals from these different traditions.

Slessarev-Jamir cites IWJ director Kim Bobo saying that religious texts should be used as more than repositories of “proof texts” and offering other ways to help activists “to articulate the biblical and theological underpinnings of the work in which they are engaged” (127). Yet the

book itself remains committed to reducing this activism to its definition of the core of the prophetic. Slessarev-Jamir concludes that the result of this sort of worker justice organizing is that clergy “make solidarity with the *other* a central element of their ministry” (130). On her view, “activists are mining their foundational religious texts for fresh interpretations that not only affirm the sacredness of all living beings but their interconnectedness as well” (18) – in other words, pragmatically using religious texts to affirm the crypto-Protestant definition of the prophetic asserted by Slessarev-Jamir. At the end of the day, however, one wonders whether this is just Slessarev-Jamir’s perspective or also Bobo’s. In other words, is Bobo really committed to developing thick theologies or just to deepening commitments to her political project through a broader appeal to theological resources? The tension indicated by this question is exacerbated by the veneer of pluralism infusing both Bobo’s perspective and Slessarev-Jamir’s. The supposed pluralism creates a distance from all theological commitments, since all religions are effectively on equal footing, leaving the actual theological commitment to liberal Protestantism unexplored, and effectively thin, effectively reduced to concern for “the other.”

The definition of the prophetic at the core of *Prophetic Activism* motivates a distinction between “conservative Christians,” who “strive to impose their singular set of religious ethics upon a religiously diverse American body politics,” and progressives, who “aim to broaden American politics by incorporating people who currently have no voice within the political process” (4). Progressives are entitled to the title “prophetic” because their inclusive understanding of politics means building relationships that include the other, motivated by a vision of a future world where all are included. The book divides sites of progressive activism into two categories: those which directly involve “the other” and those which involve those who are in positions of privilege but who identify with “the other” (22). Slessarev-Jamir labels the

former “borderlands” activism and the latter “cosmopolitan” activism. The former includes community organizing, worker justice organizing, and immigrant rights organizing. The latter includes peace activism and movements for global justice. The two types of activism utilize different techniques and technologies. Social media, for example, help to mobilize cosmopolitans but may barely reach undocumented workers.

The distinction between borderlands and cosmopolitan activism helps to illuminate a distinction that is in the background of *Prophetic Activism*, and that is essential to discerning the theological significance of social justice movements. This is the distinction between activism, advocating on behalf of an issue or community, and organizing, mobilizing a community itself to address an injustice. While there are professional organizers, who possess skills that catalyze a community’s ability to amplify its own voice, the goal of the professional organizer is always to put herself out of a job by developing organic leadership in a community. The organizer and the activist are two quite different vocations (Sabl 2002). To adopt Slessarev-Jamir’s terminology, an activist cries out on behalf of a vulnerable other, generating concern in her own community for the other. An organizer lives in solidarity with others, voiding herself of many of her own preferences in order to clearly identify with the interests of a community, to tap resources in that community, and to mobilize that community to challenge the powers that be in order to right injustices. Through this process, the organizer herself is transformed. As Slessarev-Jamir’s title suggests, her account of the prophetic, as concern for the other, describes activism very well. (An interesting book could be written on the Western, post-Protestant heritage of activism). But something rather different seems to be happening in organizing, something deeper and more transformative, both of communities and of souls. The question that *Prophetic Activism* leaves

open is whether liberal Protestantism has resources to offer an account not just of activism but also of organizing.

## 2. Thick Organizing

Melissa Snarr's *All Those Who Labor* offers a forceful and persuasive theological reflection on organizing. She argues that organizing, particularly around worker justice issues, cultivates moral agency – and doing so is a theological imperative. Prioritizing moral agency over efficacy is what, for Snarr, can separate the political implications of liberal theology from liberal politics. Organizing cultivates leadership from the grassroots, allowing those who did not have the potential to lead, or even to just speak up for themselves, to exercise these capacities. Organizing does not simply help the other, on her account. It makes us see others who were previously invisible. Further, Snarr offers careful, detailed analysis of how the actual practices of organizing, such as building coalitions, working in committees, interrogating the machinations of the wealthy and the powerful, and mitigating tensions within one's own organization, can lead to human flourishing independent of whether the organizing campaign achieves its objectives. Writing as a Christian ethicist, Snarr tells a specifically theological story, one in which organizing does not just make use of religious symbols or rituals; organizing *is* a religious practice. Her book begins with a janitor at a campus living wage rally finding her own public voice to speak out about her poor wages for the first time. She proclaims, “There’s nothing they can do to me, with God on my side.” (1)

As Snarr tells it, the current living wage movement in the United States began in the early 1990s with a coalition of congregations in Baltimore, affiliated with Saul Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation. From there, it spread across the country to communities and, especially, to

college campuses. Campaigners argued that the federally mandated minimum wage was not enough to live on, and they argued that employers have an obligation to provide a just wage, a wage that does not keep the worker in poverty, that does not force the worker to depend on government assistance to survive. Snarr herself participated in two living wage campaigns, in Atlanta and Nashville, and she draws on her own experiences along with both religious ethics scholarship and social movement theory to richly illustrate her argument about the moral theology that accompanies living wage organizing. The living wage organizing Snarr studies is supported by interfaith coalitions, but she argues that it takes on a predominantly Christian flavor. She also locates herself as a Christian ethicist, and she understands herself as bringing clarity to Christians' understanding of worker justice organizing, clarity that then can be taken with them into contexts where there is interfaith dialogue.

Moral agency is at the heart of Snarr's book. She defines it as "the moral knowledge, judgment, and motivation to take actions related to the right and the good" (5). The short version of her argument is that friction, struggle, cultivates moral agency: it makes us more motivated to pursue the right and the good, it sharpens our judgment by making us suspicious of mystifications, and it makes us wise. When we see that big corporations, or big universities, will lie to their workers and to the press we learn to be suspicious of the claims to righteousness of the wealthy and the powerful. The power wielded by those very corporations, by those members of the 1%, through ideologies of neoliberalism, racism, and misogyny, becomes suspect. As Snarr puts it, "[M]oral agency is analytically cultivated, in part, by helping people dissect and deconstruct the 'givenness' of social structures and discern the impact those structures have on their lives" (39). Put in more theological terms, through organizing we become suspicious of idolatry.

At the same time that organizing builds suspicion of idolatry it also teaches deep and rich solidarity. This solidarity is not built through “shared lifestyle, consumer culture, [or] common education and employment experience” (78), but through shared religious commitments, and shared struggle. Organizing for justice under the (explicit or implicit) banner of shared Christian ideals brings together individuals who, if their lives were formed only by market forces, would rarely interact as equals. And organizing does more than promote equality: it thrusts into positions of leadership and responsibility those who rarely have such opportunities. As Snarr points out, churches are often the only places where low wage workers hold positions of responsibility, for example as committee chairpersons or as treasurers. Organizing taps these capacities and transfers them into the public sphere. The resulting solidarity is not only a feeling of collective effervescence but a variegated collectivity in which each member cultivates and contributes her own abilities. Further, according to Snarr, this solidarity is a virtue. It is a disposition to commit oneself to the common good, not only in this organizing campaign but in unforeseeable future contexts.

Moral agency is not only something we should desire for ourselves. It is also what we ought to desire for others. Progressive Christians often understand themselves as advocating for justice rather than charity. Snarr implicitly complicates this framing. She is saying that we should advocate for moral agency rather than justice. Moral agency gives individuals the capacity to claim justice for themselves, on their own terms, rather than benefiting from a just social arrangement achieved by activists. Indeed, we might say justice is to activism as moral agency is to organizing (and as charity is to service). Such conclusions operate at the level of analysis, not political rhetoric. In the worker justice organizing efforts Snarr studies, it is, indeed, justice that is demanded. Justice may or may not be achieved in any given campaign, but moral agency is

always achieved. Snarr points to liturgical calendars as a model for understanding this process. There are peaks and valleys in the liturgical year, but all are part of the larger drama of salvation.<sup>3</sup>

Snarr argues that it is important to maintain the balance between movement rhetoric and critical reflection. She takes issue with living wage campaigns that too fully embrace the language of certain mainstream American political and economic ideals in order to gain sympathy from a broader audience. Some campaigns see themselves as offering low wage workers the opportunity to participate in the American dream or to achieve financial independence. Snarr argues that, from a theological perspective, it is always important to emphasize interdependence, to emphasize community solidarity over individual success, to emphasize the common good over consumer goods. She writes of “our creation by God as social beings” and “God’s own nature, in Trinitarian formation,” as underscoring these values (60). In other words, for Snarr theological commitments take priority over political efficacy, even though she recognizes that the two are not wholly unrelated.

On Snarr’s account, religious symbols and concepts are not simply tapped to achieve political ends, even if some organizers may understand themselves as acting in this way. Because “narratives, symbols, principles, and rituals of faith communities regularly encourage ethical reflection in the daily lives of these practitioners,” when those religious idioms are deployed in the context of political organizing they similarly invite ethical reflection (40). They also hook into a set of resources for that ethical reflection in a religious tradition, resources that are quite different from those available in mainstream American culture, with its commitment to

---

<sup>3</sup> Bretherton makes a related point: “Attention to the temporal ordering of Christian witness within the liturgical year helps us notice the spaces in between formal participation in either ecclesial or political life. That which seems peripheral can be revalued as a locus of divine-human relationship. We related to God not only through direct presence or absence but also in oblique, circumlocutionary, contingent, and seemingly coincidental ways” (193).

neoliberal economics and with only a desiccated moral vocabulary. Snarr insightfully notes that there is rarely direct citation of authoritative religious figures in religiously inflected organizing. Rather, religion plays a subtler public role: theological arguments and styles of thought frame the way issues are approached and how they are represented.

There is a sharp divide between the approach to labor organizing taken by unions and the approach taken by religious organizations, according to Snarr. The former have purely pragmatic, worldly interests. Winning a campaign is the goal, and all means necessary may be employed to do so. “Theological solidarity has a different ontological ground than union solidarity,” she writes (90). Where unions are concerned with the interests of their members, Snarr worries that too often unions have overlooked the interests of non-union workers, and too often they have ignored the interests of workers based on race, gender, or immigration status. Religious solidarity is based on “the more inclusive love of God and God’s vision for the world” (90). This distinction is rather perplexing, given that churches, just like unions, have at best a mixed record on racial, gender, and immigrant inclusion. Snarr is comparing actual unions to Christian ideals rather than comparing union ideals, of universal worker solidarity, to Christian ideals, or comparing actual unions to actual churches. The theological meaning of labor unions remains an open, and interesting, question, for they seem to cultivate moral agency in similar ways as churches. Indeed, Snarr describes religious communities in the United States as cultivating the capacities of low-wage workers in the same way as robust labor unions, as well as leftist political parties, in other parts of the world. Labor itself, as closely connected with the meaning of our humanity, calls for further theological reflection – one thinks, for example, of Simone Weil – which might give particular theological significance to unions.



The problems that come with labor unions, and churches, cannot be so easily relegating to the domain of institutions as opposed to the idealized activity of organizing, rendered theologically pure through its core function of increasing moral agency. Organizing is messy work, cultivating the size of egos alongside the agency of the disenfranchised. Snarr's living wage example is so morally unambiguous that it may lead us to forget that discerning the issue around which to organize is a deeply fraught process.<sup>4</sup> Even if the process of organizing clarifies moral judgment and clears away the distortions of ideology, the start of the process, when a community is deciding which issues matter most by canvassing community members, leans on the unreflective views of community members. We want there to be a way to distinguish the form of organizing practiced by White Citizens' Councils from that practiced by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, both in the 1960s South. Worryingly, Saul Alinsky's first successful organizing effort, in Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood, transformed into a white supremacist organization, protecting the neighborhood from the intrusion of racial minorities.

### 3. Augustinian Organizing

Luke Bretherton extols community organizing, specifically the style championed by Alinsky, for advancing a theological vision. Organizing, according to Bretherton, means "fostering of a common life amid the fractured anomie and injustice of the modern city" (73). Even more than Snarr, Bretherton emphasizes the theological import of virtue and community, and he sees community organizing as participating in this sort of spiritual formation. He writes that "community organization involves a form of political *ascesis* or disciplined formation: it

---

<sup>4</sup> While Stout (2010) describes some of the complications faced by community organizing efforts, he does not address this problem of issue discernment. I do not address Stout's book here because it does not offer an account of the theological meaning of community organizing. It offers an account of the political theoretical significance of community organizing efforts that include religious communities.

educates and apprentices people into the practices necessary for sustaining public or civic friendships and, through these friendships, forging a common world with those who are different or with whom they disagree” (77). Like Snarr, then, Bretherton sees organizing as a way to build deep relationships with the other that are not built on charity or compassion but on friendship, on working together towards shared civic aspirations. These relationships cross denominational boundaries, and they cross the religion-secular divide. They are based on “common objects of love,” yet for Christians the work of “discovering and tending” these objects is a way of witnessing to the “Lordship of Christ over all things” – in other words, is part of the Christian narrative, not reducible to, say, concern for the other (84). Bretherton, like Snarr, offers a political vision for liberal theology distinct from liberal politics.

On the Alinsky model, organizing is not just about making new friends. It is also, crucially, about making enemies. Organizing involves telling a story about how the interests of ordinary people (in Alinsky’s terminology, the “Have-Nots”) are being trampled over by those with power (the “Haves”). A target must be identified and demonized resulting in a polarized political landscape. Bretherton quickly moves past this conflict at the heart of Alinsky’s model of organizing, concluding that “the point of these tactics is not conflict per se, but the opening up of a space for new ways of relating or addressing an issue, ways that reconfigure the unjust status quo” (79). Then, Bretherton associates Alinsky’s cultivation of conflict with Augustine’s emphasis on the contradictions within the secular world and the need, through “martyrdom,” to demonstrate loyalty to the city of God. But there are further important implications for Christian politics here. Instead of seeing the essential political imperative as that of finding unity, of gathering the scattered shards of fallen creation, Bretherton, with Alinsky, seems to embrace an agonistic politics, one animated by conflict, by the refusal to see false coherence (Honig 1993;

Laclau and Mouffe 1985). This complements Snarr's point about organizing as building moral agency: the ability to narrate, and judge, stories of conflict is also one of the capacities requisite for full moral agency.

Yet Bretherton remains ambivalent, his affinity for Christian harmony pulling him away from a whole-hearted embrace of agonistic politics. He rejects the hermeneutics of suspicion as "anti-political because it undermines the possibility of acting together and discerning goods in common, positing a realm of only private or hidden interests" (101). But Bretherton describes the *saeculum* as a place where interests are, in fact, opaque, where it takes difficult discernment to identify objects of common love – and even then it is not entirely certain that we have judged rightly. "Judgment and proclamation" are necessary, but so is careful listening, "an antidote to self-glorification, idolatry, and regimes of control" (216; 214). Having the skill to toggle between sympathetic listening, critical analysis, and political rhetoric seems particularly difficult, and Bretherton offers little counsel after announcing it as a problem.

Bretherton is acutely aware of the danger of thin theology. The cause of thin theology, he charges, is contemporary capitalism, which inserts Christianity into the market, thereby commodifying and coopting it, muting its critical force and its moral imagination. Borrowing a term from sociology, Bretherton worries about "institutional isomorphism", that Christian churches take on the shape of secular organizations. The concepts and images of the secular, market-driven world are so dominant that often they even determine Christians' responses to the antinomies of that world, to the injustices too acute for ideology to conceal. Ostensibly faith-based organizations adopt a "service-delivery model," following the logic of the market rather than the logic of Scripture. Bretherton takes his task to be recovering specifically Christian resources, resources that have not been coopted or commodified – resources that offer a

genuinely critical, even radical, response to the injustices of our contemporary world. But Bretherton is careful to distinguish his project from the work of those Christian political theologians who would paint a stark contrast between Christianity and secular, capitalist modernity. He describes our contemporary moment as one in which “multiple modernities, each with their respective relationship to religious belief and practice, are overlapping and interacting within the same shared, predominantly urban spaces”, causing binaries between the Christian and the secular, the public and the private, and the left and the right to break down (15, italics removed). Bretherton takes his task not to be forcing a choice between the Christian story of peace and the secular story of violence; rather, he takes his task to be explicating how existing Christian practices already are, in complicated ways, resisting market commodification and cooptation.

Bretherton is a patient and careful reader of a broad range of theological and secular scholarship, from John Milbank to Karl Barth to Sheldon Wolin to Giorgio Agamben. He has a talent for rejecting hyperbole while creatively engaging with provocative insights. Prime among the resources Bretherton seeks to recover is the thought of Augustine. From Augustine Bretherton takes an appreciation for the complexity of our present moment, between Christ’s resurrection and his return. Both the city of God and the earthly city pull on us in this moment, and neither is decisive. Christians’ aspiration should not be to establish eschatological peace on earth; it should be to advance “Babylon’s peace,” the best peace possible in a fallen world (18). As we saw above, advancing this peace may involve acknowledging that politics is a domain of conflict, and complex and shifting stories of conflict – not simply a story that opposes earthly and heavenly cities – must be told. But, at the same time, there must also be a commitment to civic friendship. According to Bretherton, the foundation of civic friendship is listening, listening

to one's neighbor and listening to Scripture. Listening is the way that churches should be political: hearing the stories of a community, both religious and secular, together with the stories of the Christian tradition. Immersed in those stories, the just response comes naturally.

Liberal democracy, for Bretherton, is essentially a good thing, preserving the dignity of humans and providing a framework suited for the fallen world, making space for Christians to engage politically guided by their faith. Modern nation states are not "monolithically bad" because they "do maintain earthly peace" (126). Following his general disposition, Bretherton prefers to approach the nation state in terms of "better or worse" instead of "good or bad." Positioning the "Christian cosmopolitanism" that he advances as an alternative to both excessive emphasis on national sovereignty and rootless liberal cosmopolitanism, he finds in the Christian tradition resources for holding together the particular and the universal, for holding up diversity in unity without smothering that diversity. Getting this framework right has practical political implications when Bretherton considers questions of immigration. Christians must acknowledge that nation states exist, he argues, when considering who counts as their neighbors, and how those neighbors should be treated. Economic migrants should not necessarily be welcomed with open arms, but political refugees should be so welcomed (Bretherton acknowledges the difficulty in distinguishing between these two categories). Providing sanctuary for refugees is a reminder that "if Christ is King, then no earthly sovereign or community has the power or right to utterly exclude or make an exception of anyone from the status of a human being" (157). In making decisions on refugee status, earthly sovereigns often exhibit their ambitions to divinity, their desire to designate who does and does not count as human. As Carl Schmitt and more recently Agamben have shown, this is a natural way that earthly sovereignty operates: deciding on the exception. Christians, according to Bretherton, have a duty to witness to the true sovereign, and

in doing so they must not accept refugees as exceptional, buying into the state's logic. They must recognize refugees as fellow human beings "able to express themselves within and act upon a common world" (159).

While sanctuary for refugees offers a helpful example that Bretherton's public theology can account for, it is less clear how he might approach other issues. For example, how would the realities of the nation state and the commitment to Christian witness be balanced when considering whether or not to support sanctions on a human rights violating regime? Or is this not the sort of question that Bretherton thinks Christians ought to concern themselves with? This seems like an appealing deflection, keeping the focus on local communities and local movements for social justice, but Bretherton's account of refugee policy suggests that he views larger public policy questions within the remit of public theology. If so, one wonders how he might treat electoral politics. Do political parties, or the right political party, offer the same sort of opportunities for action towards objects of common love as community organizations? One senses that Bretherton would say no, but further explanation would help to sharpen the perspective he is attempting to develop.

#### 4. Thick Witnessing

The proper response for Christians thrust into the realm of electoral politics, according to Jennifer McBride, is to confess sin and acknowledge the lordship of Christ. Only this can "break through the dualisms partisan politics often creates and offer something unique and new" (4). While this may seem like an apolitical or antipolitical response, the project of McBride's *The Church for the World* is to demonstrate that confession is the proper basis for Christian politics. Like Snarr and Bretherton, McBride develops a thick public theology through reflection on

political involvement; she also taps Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a resource. After three chapters of Bonhoeffer explication that also construct a dialogue with Barth and Paul, McBride concludes her book with two chapters of theological ethnography based on her participant observation of two intentional Christian communities. These communities do not clearly fall on one side or the other of the activist/organizer distinction. Rather, they understand themselves to be witnessing to the lordship of Christ while living with, and serving, communities in need.

Bonhoeffer is an appealing resource for American liberal theology because he wrote at a time when liberalism, both political and theological, was radical: Bonhoeffer's work and life were anathema to the anti-liberal Nation Socialist state. Although McBride attends to the breadth and depth of Bonhoeffer's theological vision, beyond the biographical and spiritual snippets to which he is so often reduced, the example of his personal commitment, unto the death, presents the sort of inspiration that a Niebuhr or a Tillich just cannot offer up. At the center of McBride's reconstruction of Bonhoeffer's thought is a distinction between triumphalist Christian theology ("theology of glory") and humble Christian theology ("theology of the cross"). When Christians intervene in public debates, too often they are under the sway of the former, McBride charges. They believe that they have privileged access to certain ultimate truths which they will share with others, and which ought to be adopted by all. In contrast, the style of public theology that McBride, following Bonhoeffer, advocates is one that first and foremost emphasizes its ignorance of everything except the fact that Christ is Lord, that emphasizes the limits of human understanding, and that proclaims all, including the public theologian, subject to God's judgment. Affirming that Christ is the truth does not mean that the truth consists in any specific propositions to which we have access. Christ was a person, not reducible to propositions. The proper response to Him is witness. By witness McBride does not mean what contemporary

evangelical Christians mean, witness as part of a conversion process. Rather, witness here means a commitment to the notion that only God is righteous, and it means a lifestyle that corresponds to that commitment. On this view, no moral or political stances can be taken definitively. This style of public engagement, according to McBride, opens rather than closes conversations. It positions the Christian as an open-minded participant in discussions of the day's issues, but it reminds interlocutors that, for the Christian, Christ always remains authoritative.

The proper role for churches, according to McBride, is to confess sin and repent with public action. As the body of Christ in the world, the church mirrors Christ's own acceptance of human guilt and His repentance on behalf of humanity. The church accepts the world's guilt as its own and repents on behalf of the world, playing its proper role in the drama of redemption. Indeed, that is the very definition of church: "the body called to repentance" (9). This repentance is not abstract. It focuses on specific sins committed by a specific church, such as a history of racism. All churches, even those in marginalized communities, are defined by the call to repent. A black church might, McBride suggests, "repent for ostracizing adolescent children from its life together instead of entering into the pain and complexity of street culture" (10). However, even as specific sins are being confessed and public repentance is taking place, churches must remember that they are not making themselves moral, that they have no claim on morality.

At most, churches witness to Christ. McBride worries that churches aspire to do more, that they make a claim on morality at the level of theological reflection and at the level of public rhetoric. This worry subtle and slippery, and precisely how it works is not entirely fleshed out in *The Church for the World*. While the practice of identifying with the other is to be commended, it would seem that proclaiming oneself to be identified with the other would be an example of the wrong kind of witness, of the "rhetoric of morality" that McBride associates with the



theology of glory and which positions the proclaimer on “one more side in the battle over morality” (48). Yet McBride does recommend that public theology speak in public, not just point to a picture of a cross. The speech must be “intelligible in a pluralistic society” and must grow out of faithful action (51). This faithful action means a certain style of living together. It means a way of living always inflected by repentance. McBride endorses and develops the theological view that the significance of Christ was not his death for human sin but rather that he lived with this sin, and this is the model she urges individuals and communities to live. But, again, the pressing and difficult question of how to toggle between the register of political rhetoric, the register of religiously motivated action, and the register of critical reflection remains inconclusively addressed.

Bonhoeffer thought that the secularizing world around him was a privilege because ideas about God were not overdetermined by the culture in which he lived, allowing for Christians to realize and acknowledge their ignorance of religious truths, other than the truth of Christ. McBride suggests that our contemporary pluralistic religious context is in some ways similar to Bonhoeffer’s context, similarly encouraging Christian humility. McBride points to Christian witness today in two communities: one predominantly white, living in solidarity with Sudanese refugees in Portland, Maine, the other multiracial, living in the downtrodden southeastern quadrant of Washington, D.C. While neither community privileges the language of confession and repentance itself, McBride argues that the practices of these communities exemplify a theology of the cross in action. Unlike charity workers, participants in these communities devote their lives to living with those in need, allowing themselves to be transformed in the process, and affecting the transformation of those around them. They also continue to speak out publicly about the plight of the less fortunate around them and to interrogate the structural forces causing

that misfortune. McBride quotes one participant describing how she became “a better spokesperson for the true realities of the poor to the calloused, indifferent, or confused upper classes” (198). Speaking out in this way is indirectly facilitated by the community, through creating the spaces (such as community meals) for encounters between those who would not usually have a conversation. “A congressional staffer may sit next to a woman on welfare and as a result have a new understanding of poverty” (202). While some community members are frustrated that the community does not speak out with a more decisive voice, a more prophetic voice, on issues of the day, its mission is simply to create a space for conversation, with the faith that the transformations affected by that space will have a public impact. Community membership trains in judgment suspension – and so, theologically, in allowing God to remain the only one who judges.

## 5. Praxis

While in some ways McBride’s public theology seems quite different than those of Snarr and Bretherton, seems more passive, more quiet, McBride is also prioritizing the theological in politics, is also tapping Christian resources, is also offering an account of enlarged moral agency through public participation, and is also emphasizing that public theology takes place through action rather than through argument. Indeed, we might say that McBride offers a negative public theology rather than a positive public theology. Her emphasis is on saying where God is not in public life rather than where God is, on saying what God would not support rather than saying what God would support. In doing so, we make space for God to be present, to guide our right actions. Snarr and Bretherton offer up the practice of labor or community organizing as, effectively, a means to participate in the divine, a claim which, from McBride’s perspective,

would smack of hubris. Yet what they all share, and what they share in a certain way with Slessarev-Jamir, is a commitment to public theology through public action, a commitment reflected methodologically by integrating ethnographic or sociological research in their constructive theological accounts, and a commitment shared in that constructive theology, where reflection on praxis informs the normative account presented. If liberal Protestant public theology cannot thicken by immersing itself in tradition – antithetical to the core values of liberal Protestantism – it can thicken by turning to critical, careful reflection on practice, in dialogue with historical, conceptual, and comparative resources.

This emphasis on praxis might seem reminiscent of liberation theology of a generation earlier, with its commitment to solidarity with the poor growing out of life lived together with the poor. But, as we have seen, “the poor” is not the object of any of these books. Even Slessarev-Jamir’s “other” includes the “immigrant, low-wage service worker, ex-felon, lesbian or gay couple” (22). In response to the realization that marginalization takes many forms, liberation theology has sometimes moved from a focus on the poor to a focus on spaces of marginalization, that is, to contextual theology: reading Scripture and tradition from the perspective of a given marginalized group (a move harshly criticized by Petrella 2008). Mainline Protestant denominations have to some extent embraced this shift, supporting the spiritual formation of communities of their members who share a marginalized identity. But contextual theology often struggles to articulate a political vision beyond advocacy for an identity community, even if the marginalization of that identity community is seen as symptomatic of broader social ills. The books under review here retain a grander aspiration, to speak to injustices more broadly, particularly to those injustices caused by contemporary capitalism.

The insights of contextual theology do pose a challenge to the works under review, for the specificity of human difference, and the pathologies brought about by marginalization, can sometimes be ignored in the excitement of activism or organizing. Snarr is particularly attentive to this worry, and she sees it as a virtue: struggling with difference during an organizing campaign actually enriches the lives and capacities of those involved. The problem is acknowledging rather than repressing difference at a time when the latter may seem especially convenient – and such acknowledgment is what the *theological* vision of organizing forces, according to Snarr. But is hearing the other’s story of difference enough? It remains an open question whether the activism, organizing, and witness described in these works would be meaningful, theologically or politically, if adopted by a community defined by a long history of marginalization. In such a context, it is not simply rights or goods that must be achieved but rather an affirmation of group identity, a reversal of generations of denigration. Furthermore, in many cases Christian theology has been complicit in that denigration, and working through that complicity is crucial, and not unrelated to the project of public theology.

Should we really be so suspicious of the Moral Monday protesters, or of thin public theology more generally? After all, the Moral Monday protesters are clearly mobilizing institutional and symbolic resources to advance social justice, and to motivate hundreds to be arrested for the cause, even if those resources are not *purely* Christian. A critic might object that the thick versus thin distinction obfuscates the extent to which religion and culture mingle, inextricably. This critic would argue that thickness is an attribute of moral imagination, that genuinely critical or prophetic social justice movements tap into rich veins of theology but also history, music, art, and oratory in ways that denaturalize the status quo and motivate us with

visions of new, better worlds.<sup>5</sup> However, in a context of secularism, where religious ideas and practices are dogmatically excluded from certain public domains, the return of the repressed, the return of the theological, has a particularly potent critical force. And, for those Christians who believe in the transcendence of God, theology that refuses idolatry is always repressed – and so always a potent critical force.

## REFERENCES

Bretherton, Luke

2010 *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Cahill, Lisa Sowle

2005 *Theological Bioethics: Participation, Justice, and Change*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press.

Chappell, David L.

2003 *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Hauerwas, Stanley and Romand Coles

---

<sup>5</sup> Compare Lisa Sowle Cahill's account of science, economics, and liberalism as "thick" traditions (2005, Chapter 1).

2008 *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

Hirschkind, Charles

2006 *Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Honig, Bonnie

1993 *Political Theory and the Displacement of Politics*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Jenkins, Willis

2008 *Ecologies of Grace: Environmental Ethics and Christian Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Laclau, Ernesto and Chantal Mouffe

1985 *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.

Mahmood, Saba

2004 *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Masuzawa, Tomoko

2005 *The Invention of World Religions, Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McBride, Jennifer M.

2012 *The Church for the World: A Theology of Public Witness*. New York: Oxford University Press.

McCutcheon, Russell

1997 *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press.

North Carolina Council of Churches

2013 “A Joint Statement by Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and United Methodist Leaders in North Carolina.” [http://www.ncchurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/combined\\_letter.pdf](http://www.ncchurches.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/combined_letter.pdf)

Ottati, Douglas

2013 *Theology for Liberal Protestants: God the Creator*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Petrella, Ivan

2008 *Beyond Liberation Theology: A Polemic*. London: SCM Press.

Pinches, Charles

2008 "Hauerwas and Political Theology: The Next Generation." *Journal of Religious Ethics*  
36.3: 513-542.

Rogers, Eugene

1999 *Sexuality and the Christian Body: Their Way into the Triune God*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Sabl, Andrew

2002 *Ruling Passions: Political Offices and Democratic Ethics*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton  
University Press.

Slessarev-Jamir, Helene

2011 *Prophetic Activism: Progressive Religious Justice Movements in Contemporary America*.  
New York: New York University Press.

Snarr, C. Melissa

2011 *All You That Labor: Religion and Ethics in the Living Wage Movement*. New York: New  
York University Press.

Stout, Jeffrey

2004 *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

2010 *Blessed are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton  
University Press.