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BOOK PROFILE: RELIGION, POLITICS,
AND THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT: POST-9/11
POWERS AND AMERICAN EMPIRE

A profile of Mark Lewis Taylor, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005. xiv + 194 pp. \$16.00 (paperback). ISBN: 0800637763.

DESPITE THE NUMEROUS EFFORTS to keep religion and politics apart, the two are often uneasily interrelated in American public life. Whether we like it or not, religion often seems to creep into politics, and politics into religion, making it difficult, perhaps even impossible, to draw a sharp distinction between the two. But as Mark Lewis Taylor points out in his recent book, *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right: Post-9/11 Powers and American Empire*, a new configuration of the relationship between religion and politics in America threatens to undermine the democratic values and practices on which the country was founded. To be more specific, since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, a militant version of the Christian faith, usually referred to as the Christian Right, has gained considerable influence among many, including persons who hold important positions in the U.S. government. This militant form of Christianity, according to Taylor, collaborates with political power, supporting and strengthening a post-9/11 imperial regime characterized by unilateralism, nationalism, inequality, war, and torture. Taylor's book focuses on describing, understanding, and challenging this post-9/11 empire.

One feature of this empire is what Taylor refers to as "today's public rhetoric of evil," which is the subject of the first chapter (17). Especially since the terrorist attacks against the U.S. on 9/11, talk of evil has been prevalent in American public life. As Taylor notes, this rhetoric, used by political leaders and advisors as well as the scholars associated with the statement "What We're Fighting For—A Letter From America," identifies terrorism against the U.S. as "the great evil" (18). The use of such reasoning serves to justify a protracted "war against terrorism" to protect America's values and security against the "invading evil" (18). However, according to Taylor, this notion relies on a simplistic opposition between good and evil that hinders any attempt to understand terrorism and evaluate the way in which U.S. policies may contribute to it. Against such

dualism, Taylor, drawing on Augustine and Tillich, suggests viewing evil as a distortion or privation of the good. Understanding evil in this manner allows for a more thoughtful and balanced appreciation of the aspects that contribute to the making of a post-9/11 American empire.

Understanding the factors at work behind this new imperial regime requires accounting for the significance of the event of 9/11, which is the topic of the second chapter. Taylor notes that 9/11 can be viewed in at least two ways: as “a historic moment” and as “a mythic moment” (36). As a historic moment, 9/11 indicates “the plethora of recountable events, some dramatic in nature, some less so, but all of which make up describable (and often debatable) activities and processes surrounding 9/11” (37). Included in these events are the attacks themselves, the effects that these had on American life, and the various measures taken by the federal government in response. However, appreciating the significance that these events hold for the U.S., according to Taylor, requires that 9/11 also be viewed as a mythic moment that shattered America’s deeply rooted sense of invulnerability and exceptionalism. Rather than question the content of this myth, however, the responses to 9/11 insisted even more fervently upon America’s supposed uniqueness, resulting in an “especially aggressive nationalist project” that draws on the traditions of American political romanticism and contractual liberalism for its justification (44).

The third chapter discusses how this mindset contributes to the current nationalist project. According to Taylor, American political romanticism expresses what he calls “belonging being,” defined as “a way of being that is marked by personal or group senses of belonging to the past, to past traditions, nations, peoples, lineages” (49). Understood in this sense, belonging being idealizes and idolizes America’s past and emphasizes the putative uniqueness of the country’s role in the destiny of the world. The events of 9/11, Taylor argues, renewed and intensified this romantic drive, especially in two complimentary groups, the Christian Right and the neo-conservatives. The Christian Right represents a well-organized “powerful romanticist movement in the revolutionary mode that has new powers in federal government and has created well-funded structures that affect federal policy” (53). As such, this faction combines both the romantic idea of American exceptionalism and a conservative interpretation of Christianity. Using its numerous and varied connections with corporate and political leaders, Taylor notes that this coalition attempts to infuse American life and policy with a religiously tinged nationalism. The neo-conservatives share this nationalistic emphasis, though without the explicit appeal to religious ideals that characterizes the Christian Right, and aim to expand America’s dominance in global affairs through an aggressive foreign policy and increased militarization. The collaboration between these two groups, according to Taylor, results in a seemingly unconstrained drive for an authoritarian, unipolar American power that threatens the practices of democracy.

The fourth chapter considers the other tradition guiding the current nationalist project, contractual liberalism. Unlike political romanticism, which looks to the past for its sense of mission, contractual liberalism manifests what Taylor refers to as “expectant being,” anticipating “growth, progress, and improvement” by drawing on the social and political principles of classical liberalism such as freedom and equality (72). However, according to Taylor, the actual practice of liberalism has usually been “contractual,” that is, “restricted to a select body of people” and “organized in a way that is restrictive and hence subversive of its own ideals,” as evident in the more predatory elements of global capitalism and the structures of racism, sexism, and classism, to name a few (74-75). But when economic interests are threatened in times of crisis, contractual liberalism tends “to strike an alliance with forms of romantic nationalism to protect existing economic orders whose disparities of wealth make them vulnerable to critique, reform, or toppling” (81). The collaboration between contractual liberalism and romantic nationalism is especially evident in post-9/11 America, inasmuch as the two conspire together and exploit each other to support their respective interests and visions. The danger in such an alliance, according to Taylor, is that liberalism easily morphs into outright anti-liberalism, as evident in the aversion to liberalism, promotion of deception, and affirmation of nationalism embraced by many members of the Bush administration, which Taylor discusses at length and traces back to the political ideas of Leo Strauss.

Taylor begins to develop his alternative to these traditions that support American empire in the fifth chapter, which focuses on the idea of “prophetic spirit” (96). Although the idea of prophetic spirit carries religious connotations, Taylor primarily uses the term to refer to “a distinctive configuration of cultural and historical conditions that enable creative emergence of emancipation” (107). By focusing on emancipation, prophetic spirit emphasizes the role played by the individuals and groups excluded from and oppressed by the structures of empire. Prophetic spirit, in this sense, draws on the “breadth” and “depth” of historical experience, particularly the forms of the latter often consigned to the periphery, to develop a way of being that is resistant to and seeks to change the post-9/11 imperial configuration (99-100). This way of being, according to Taylor, expresses “revolutionary belonging” and “revolutionary expectation” (109).

Revolutionary belonging, which is the topic of the sixth chapter, serves as a corrective to the distorted sense of belonging being in American political romanticism. Whereas the latter views history as static, idealizing and idolizing the past to produce a zealous nationalism, revolutionary belonging stresses “mobility,” that is, “the motions and movements of revolutionary change” that have characterized and continue to influence American life and history (111). Mobility, according to Taylor, can be understood in three ways. First, mobility emphasizes the advent of a revolutionary historical subject that seeks justice and inclusion, particularly for “the masses left marginalized and oppressed by history’s ruling groups” (113). Second, this revolutionary subjectivity finds its

justification and impetus in the “stories of rebellion” leading up to and surrounding the events of the American Revolution (116). Finally, revolutionary belonging as mobility creates its own “mythic language” from a myriad of traditions and narratives, a language that gives expression to ideals of emancipation and the concrete possibility of societal change (119).

These aspects of revolutionary belonging give way to a sense of revolutionary expectation, which is the subject of the seventh and final chapter. Like the correction that revolutionary belonging offers to belonging being, revolutionary expectation seeks to overcome the distortions present in the expectant being of contractual liberalism by fostering a type of “radical liberalism” (127). Taylor’s radical liberalism focuses on the “leadership of the marginalized and oppressed and those in authentic solidarity with them” as the historical, collective agents of change and the bearers of freedom, liberty, and democracy for all (129). Taylor provides numerous contemporary examples of such agents, who, although displaying many and diverse concerns, all share a commitment to “the social practices of prophetic spirit” (130). These agents also have available to them different genres or styles of expression, such as “aesthetic imagination,” “public enactment,” and “deliberative reasoning,” all of which find practical organization in various institutional and non-institutional structures (142-147). The important thing for Taylor is that these structures express the ideals of a radical liberalism and prophetic spirit, and work together to provide an alternative to the anti-democratic threat of nationalism and empire.

Taylor’s conception of radical liberalism remains indebted to both classical liberal principles and certain theological ideals, particularly the more prophetic and liberationist modes of Christian thinking and practice. Nonetheless, Taylor downplays the doctrinal basis of the latter, insisting on the necessity to make the practices of prophetic spirit available to all. In the end, Taylor remains uncertain about the role of Christian communities in his brand of revolutionary politics, which he discusses in the Epilogue. Christianity is about more than politics, as Taylor notes, but at its best it “goes through and not around the political practice of liberation” (162). Such a vision, though, is often forgotten or ignored, and, given the current alignment of many churches with the traditions of political romanticism and contractual liberalism, Taylor’s hesitancy seems warranted.

However, it seems that this skepticism could also be leveled against Taylor’s brand of radical liberalism. Taylor’s uneasiness regarding the role of churches in politics relies on the argument that the more revolutionary ideas and practices of Christianity have been co-opted and distorted by the demands of and desire for empire. According to Taylor, the liberationist impulse of liberalism has also been distorted through the present forms of belonging being and expectant being; indeed, this has been the case throughout most of America’s history, as Taylor notes. Nevertheless, Taylor remains optimistic about the role that a renewed liberalism can play in an emancipatory politics. A little more caution would seem

to be in order, especially given liberalism's track record and current configuration. Despite this concern, Taylor's book provides a cogent analysis of the factors that contribute to the making of America's post-9/11 empire and offers a plausible alternative to it.

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