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Reviews

Michael Prior, ed., *Speaking the Truth about Zionism and Israel*. London: Melisende, 2004. 254 pp. £12.95. ISBN 1-901764-26-5 (pbk).

Speaking the Truth about Zionism and Israel is a bold and frank collection of papers edited by the late Michael Prior. It begins with a foreword by Archbishop Tutu, who compares the situation of the Palestinians living under occupation to that of the black South Africans under apartheid. Both South Africans and Jews have lived through difficult times; in the case of the South Africans this was both pre and post apartheid and for the Jews it was pre and post Holocaust. The point to note is the way that South Africans and Jews have lived on after these periods of suffering.

Michael Prior's chapter mentions some of the key facts relating to what he terms "the canonical Zionist narrative." Prior traces the history of the establishment and implementation of the Zionist vision, which has now reached a stage where it seems unalterable in the mindset of Zionists. According to Prior, the key issue is the understanding of Israel as the Promised Land, surrender of which would be a betrayal of God's determination. This vision of the divine gift of land was strengthened through the Zionist movement led by Theodr Herzl whose nationalist project is subjected to substantial critique by Prior. In Herzl's private diaries, published in seven volumes in the period 1983–96, he speaks frankly of "expelling the poor population across the border unnoticed" and "denying it employment in our own country (Israel)." One readily condemns the oppression that Jews experienced during the Holocaust and sympathizes with post-war determination for a Jewish state where they could feel secure, but how could this mission be validated through the removal of everything that came in its way?

Prior highlights the tension between the Zionist political movement and the teachings of the Talmud, which he argues, does not support the Zionist project. It comes as no surprise that many states and nations base their political ambitions on a religious stance, e.g. Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, but when one considers the central tenets of governance in these nation states, they seem to have very little to do with religion or theology. Prior quotes the Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, who regards the state of Israel as "the most powerful collective expression of Jewry." This raises serious questions as to the link between Israel and Judaism. What defines Israel as a Jewish state? Is it the fact that it has a large number of Jews residing in it?

In the following chapter "Zionism, Christianity and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict," Herman and Rosemary Ruether set out to establish the historical development of the Israel–Palestine conflict by highlighting the "clash of three histories." Firstly, Zionism as a movement emerges from Europe with the aim of escaping

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an anti-Semitic environment. Secondly, Arab nationalism arises at the end of the Ottoman empire which seeks the establishment of an Arab state that would encompass the whole of the Arab world from Syria to Saudi Arabia. Thirdly, European colonialism aims to divide the Arab world amongst themselves. It is the dynamics of these three central components that culminated in the conflict we see today. Interestingly, each is led by its own political dominance in the region and the religious connotations of these clashes are far removed from the reality of the situation.

The intriguing phenomenon of Christian Zionism is discussed by Stephen Sizer in his "The International Christian Embassy, Jerusalem: A Case Study in Political Christian Zionism." The same theme is taken up by Peter J. Miano in "Mainstream Christian Zionism." He points out that the number of Christian Zionists outstrips the number of Jewish adherents of the Zionist doctrine. As a result, Miano argues that Zionism can no longer be equated with Judaism.

Ilan Pappe's "State of Denial: The Nakba in Israeli History and Today" recalls the events of 1948 during which, he bluntly states, "Jews expelled, massacred, destroyed and raped." Pappe examines the "erased chapter" of the Nakba—or Palestinian exodus—and why it has often been denied. Pappe's chapter leads on well to Daniel McGowan's "Why We Remember Deir Yassin," in which he also recalls the events of April 9, 1948 which he describes as a "massacre of Arabs committed by dissident Jewish factions of the Irgun and Stern gang."

Duncan Macpherson, in "Politics and Multi-Faith in the Holy Land: A Challenge for Christians," attempts to understand the Israel–Palestine conflict from a Christian theological perspective and how this will fit into interfaith dialogue between the three faiths. Macpherson highlights the central concern that the three faiths have with the Holy Land and why it obligates them to consider the spiritual existence of those other adherents of the Abrahamic traditions. It is quite clear that the relationship between the three faiths has been rooted theologically, politically, culturally and economically, and so it seems that the Holy Land needs the three faiths for its prosperity and success. The Anglican Communion and the Holy See have stated quite clearly that Jerusalem should not be in the hands of just one faith. Receiving such statements from Muslims is not so easy as there is no one representative religious body that could issue such a statement. The current Muslim political representatives in the Holy Land are led by a political Islam that romanticizes about a return to "Islamic" rule in the region. It remains the hope of many Muslim, Christian and Jewish believers to see a Jerusalem that is open to all without restriction.

Jean Zaru also expresses these sentiments in "Theologising, Truth and Peacemaking in the Palestinian Experience." Zaru writes a very emotional account of her experience as a Palestinian Christian who hopes a solution to the conflict can be found through God, rather than bloodshed and violence. It is this voice which Paul Eisen in his chapter, "Speaking the Truth to Jews," wishes to be heard amongst Jews. Eisen argues that Israelis and Palestinians need to unite in accepting "I've suffered, you've suffered, let's talk." In this way people can move forward together, as opposed to shifting blame to either side, which has proven to be unproductive. Eisen argues that Jews have no monopoly over suffering and they must accept that other marginalized voices also suffer, such as blacks, women, children, gays,

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workers, peasants and minorities of all kinds. Naseer Aruri in "The Right of Return and Its Detractors" argues that the right to return by Palestinians has been an issue overlooked by the main international political powers today. Elizabeth Barlow ends the collection of essays with a chapter on "Waking the Sleeping Giant," in which she highlights the lack of understanding about the political realities in the Holy Land and the religious imperatives that perpetuate the conflict.

Michael Prior has brought together a group of individuals who speak about Zionism and Israel in three key stages: the historical perspectives, the contemporary moral perspectives and the future. However, I am not altogether convinced that the boldness of this book will build bridges between Israelis and Palestinians in the Holy Land. Even the section that looks to a brighter future does little to reconcile the differences between the Israelis and Palestinians. The past must shape a better future.

My recent visit to Israel has given me much hope that there is a slow change emerging. The Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem is one such initiative in Israel, which is sensitive to Palestinian suffering just as much as Jewish/Israeli suffering. Taking part in this interfaith scriptural reading conference as a Muslim gave me an opportunity to speak to an older and younger generation of Israelis about the conflict and the future. It made me truly realize that suffering is never a one-sided affair. At the end of the conference I visited friends in Tel Aviv who did not identify themselves as Zionists but were firmly nationalistic. The truth is that peace is yearned for from all sides. The challenge is in establishing that peace, by reaching out to neighbours with compassion in your heart.

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Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. xv + 329 pp. Hbk. £17.99. ISBN 0-8028-2920-1.

Reading O'Donovan is like listening to the Carol Symphony by Hely-Hutchinson or the works of Ralph Vaughan-Williams. It is the striking combination of the traditional and the new which is breath-taking and, in consequence, leaves one breathless. O'Donovan's theological method is deliberately chosen, premised on the belief that "If a political society has in its midst a church that is taught…not to confine its deliberations to the local, national, linguistic, or racial spheres, but to explore contested issues in a catholic manner, not only attending to Christians from every present source, but also from every past age, it must have a profound effect" (*WOJ* 291).

O'Donovan exposes much of contemporary discussion as trivial, based on false premises and hence doomed to futility. What he proffers as an alternative is often so tightly written, and presumes a breadth of reading (not least of his own illumination of the tradition) that one is left giddy.

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O'Donovan promised, when he wrote *The Desire of the Nations* (*DON*), a work of political theology, that he would write a companion volume. At the time he described it as a work of Christian political ethics. *The Ways of Judgment*, based on O'Donovan's Bampton Lectures in 2003, is that companion work. The apparent distinction in method between the two books is that the first begins with the theological, the second with the political. However, for O'Donovan it is always a question of shedding "light from the Christian faith" on the obscure and elusive social and institutional realities of contemporary Western politics (*WOJ* x).

WOJ is divided into three parts: Part I: The Political Act: Judgment; Part II: Political Institutions: Representation; Part III: Life Beyond Judgment: Communication. The reason for this triadic structure O'Donovan advances at *WOJ* 239 is that "political theology … properly has a trinitarian shape." Judgment speaks of the "God-given right of judgment within the world" and is presumably appropriated to the Father. Under representation one is to think of "the God-given representative of mankind, and of the church's challenge to all other political representations." Here Christ is clearly in view. Under communication (which is O'Donovan's translation of *koinonia*), O'Donovan writes of "the eschatological summons to social communication, and of the church's modeling of communication as life beyond judgment." The Church is therefore "the model of the communication of the Spirit in the world" (*WOJ* 240).

There are problems with this claim, however. First, it is obscurely buried well into the book rather than given programmatic status, and that fact alone may alert one to its questionability. Secondly, the first two parts relate to the political act and to political institutions but the third, precisely because O'Donovan makes judgment definitive of the political, refers not to politics but to society beyond politics and to the Church in particular. This leads to the third problem with the claim. In *WOJ*, O'Donovan repeats his insistence that the political is located within the doctrine of providence. At *WOJ* 239 itself he offers the much-needed assertion that political theology belongs within the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, who is not limited to the Church but "runs ahead" of it and prepares for its mission. Yet in the triadic division of his work, the Holy Spirit appears again associated with society beyond the political, and in particular with the Church, and hence apart from the political.

WOJ opens with a chapter on "The Act of Judgment." O'Donovan remains committed to the thesis that "The authority of secular government resides in the practice of judgment" (*WOJ* 3). O'Donovan defines this broadly so as to encompass any political act of right-giving (*WOJ* 140). All political authority, post-Christ, "is to be re-conceived within this matrix and subject to the discipline of enacting right against wrong" (*WOJ* 5). What is left to rulers is the "judicial service" of witnessing to "the coming reality of God's own act of judgment" (*WOJ* 5). O'Donovan defines judgment as "an act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context" (*WOJ* 7). As a political act, it is subject to the criteria of truth and effectiveness, and must hold a balance between the two (*WOJ* 9), recognising not only the moral order but also the realities of the society it is regulating.

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This recognition leads into the second chapter entitled "Imperfectibility." Political judgments are compromises but they do not take place in a vacuum, but rather in a given context of "the generic judgments of God known to us through divine law, natural and revealed, and through salvation history." It is these divine judgments which "illumine the categorical structure of all events, and so teach us how to appraise particular events" (*WOJ* 17). O'Donovan thus integrates his ethical theory in *Resurrection and Moral Order* with his political theology. Human law-making is *ars*, taking account of local conditions and the fact that "the universal sinfulness of humankind is not a uniform sinfulness" (*WOJ* 20, 97).

From these reflections, O'Donovan turns to "Justice and Equality." With regard to justice, O'Donovan says there are only two sorts: general justice i.e. obedience and righteousness (*WOJ* 31) on the one hand, and justice-as-judgment on the other. "There is no special virtue of justice that is *not* a virtue of judgment" (*WOJ* 32). Justice-as-judgment is not, however, reducible to equality (*WOJ* 36). Following Grotius, O'Donovan argues that some forms of human enterprise require us to treat all people equally, while others require us to attribute in accordance with merit. "[A]ll justified inequalities are capable of explanation, but not as *deviations* [from a general principle of equality] but as *differences* implied in the various forms of human flourishing and achievement" (*WOJ* 41).

Chapter 4 is about "Political Judgment." In *DON* at 20, O'Donovan had somewhat alarmingly and opaquely said: "The assimilation of the idea of authority to office and structure was a cardinal mistake which arose as Western politics turned its back on its theological horizons." *WOJ* circumscribes this comment. It displays much more enthusiasm for "institutions," that is to say for differentiated arrangements for the deployment of various sorts of power and the execution of different forms of judgment. Those who are called to exercise judgment typically do so within the context of roles, each of which has its own responsibilities, and those responsibilities bind the actor (*WOJ* 53). O'Donovan's point is that the act is prior to the institution (*WOJ* 128), so that where the institutions have failed, whoever finds themselves in the position to carry out the act should do so. To those who find themselves under such political authority, obligations of obedience and solidarity ("allowing ourselves to be restricted in our freedom of action by others' necessities" (*WOJ* 54)) are imposed.

The rationale of political structures is not the preservation of private freedoms but of public freedoms "i.e. the free communications that we undertake simply because we are, as human beings, helplessly social" (*WOJ* 55). Yet O'Donovan does not want to give free rein to Aristotelian views of politics as directing society towards its ends. "Harmony is not a design conceived in a ruler's head, but a nexus of social communications that exist and flourish antecedently" (*WOJ* 61). Using a telling example, he says "political authority has no special mandate to pursue a public goal, 'the common good' conceived of as a giant millennium dome. Mankind in his and her native social existence…serves the common good simply by being *societas humana*. Government's task is to respond to *threats* to the common good, repelling whatever obstructs our acting freely together" (*WOJ* 57). This reactive character of government is coupled with the "epistemologi-

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cal priority" of wrong over right (*WOJ* 58). Political judgment is required to respond "to wrong as injury to the public good" (*WOJ* 59), and the existence of such wrong is both the necessary and the sufficient condition for governmental intervention (*WOJ* 62).

The fifth chapter is entitled "Freedom and Its Loss." For O'Donovan, the freedom which counts is "the realization of individual powers within social forms" (*WOJ* 68). Such freedom takes shape in correlation to authority and social identity. The particular concern of the chapter is to offer a critique of that alternative conception of freedom, as pure autonomy manifesting itself in "a narrowly materialist and sensual sphere of public communications" (*WOJ* 77), a spirit which O'Donovan sees as both polytheistic and idolatrous.

From these general reflections, O'Donovan turns in chapters 6 and 7 to the ideas of mercy and punishment. Returning again to the theme of *Resurrection and Moral Order*, he points out that "while the cross discriminates between God's righteous servant and the world that rejects him … it is the resurrection that vindicates the pattern of humanity that Christ lived for us and commanded us to follow" (*WOJ* 85). The problem is that political judgment cannot offer the resources for obedience. Whereas "God's redeeming judgment pours out the promised Holy Spirit upon all who believe and obey; human judgments convey no such power. The human judge may know the Holy Spirit's help in judging, but cannot shed the Holy Spirit abroad on those who are judged" (*WOJ* 87). All that human judgments can do is to "give concrete and effective condemnation" (*WOJ* 87). They address the wrongs of the past with "the goal of establishing, or maintaining, a just social order" (*WOJ* 93). This is a task to be undertaken with the humble modesty of those who know their own sinfulness (*WOJ* 98) and influenced by God's grace. Nonetheless, punishment as a practice is to do with past actions and any theory of punishment must explain how and why it responds to such actions. O'Donovan defines "punishment [as] judgment … an act of moral discrimination, that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context" (*WOJ* 107). This means that punishment is intrinsic to the enactment of judgment, whether in the criminal courts, in the civil courts, or elsewhere (*WOJ* 108). Punishment is a moral answer to the offender's wrong (*WOJ* 110); it provides the offender "with the one good always owed to [him]: the truth about his offense" (*WOJ* 118). Its distinction from the wrong is its character as judgment. O'Donovan therefore rejects "The concept of punishment as an automatic and impersonal return of evil to the doer" (*WOJ* 113). Precisely because judgment is a moral response it is not an impersonal action and therefore does not need to conform to an absolute tariff as Kant thought (*WOJ* 120). O'Donovan seeks to confirm that different societies may legitimately set differing standards, whilst reserving a place for the critique of forms of punishment "performed in secret, without due process, without legal specifications as to duration or intensity" and which do not even seek "to tell the truth about the crimes they punish" (*WOJ* 122).

In Part II, chapter 8, on "Political Authority," O'Donovan seeks to expand on his definition of freedom. He claims that "Political subjection is not servitude; the political subject is freer *as* a subject. Political authority may abridge freedom

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in certain of its exercises; but it does so only to ensure it and secure it" (*WOJ* 128). O'Donovan distinguishes political authority from society, but notes that without political authority, society collapses. Political authority concerns, however, "the step beyond 'living' to 'living well'. The good that it serves is the perfection of our social selves. From its defense of the common good it wins something new for society, a common history, a self-conscious tradition of purposes and goals …" (*WOJ* 134). But these things, this definition of the common good is, in O'Donovan's thought, only safeguarded not created by political authority. Any good political community is founded and sustained by "pre-political social virtue" (*WOJ* 138). Because of its importance to society, however, we have a duty to uphold political authority, which usually means obeying the authorities which exist and yet may occasionally mean facilitating the emergence of new authorities where the old ones have failed (*WOJ* 135). "Authority belongs to those who, embodying the identity of the community, enact right on its behalf" (*WOJ* 140). Nonetheless, obedience is to be conscientious, and if the political authority demands something which is beyond its authority, the subject must demur (*WOJ* 136–37).

In chapter 9 on "Representation," O'Donovan's starting point is a definition of "a people" as a group which imagines "a common good that unifies our overlapping and interlocking practical communications" and so sees itself "as a single agency, the largest collective agency that we can practically conceive" (*WOJ* 150). Such a group is separable from and prior to the political and judicial arrangements which come into being to defend it (*WOJ* 154).

This then leads into chapter 10 on "Legitimacy." In this chapter, O'Donovan offers an account of modern liberal democracy as potentially defensible in our present circumstances but not amounting to a universal value. O'Donovan insists that elective democracies are blunt instruments, and that it is more important that our rulers consult effectively than that all bureaucrats and minor public officials be elected. In general, he prioritises a commitment to the "liberal" features of government such as local representative organs, free speech, the obligation of government to natural and divine law, the recognition of basic individual rights at law, the independence of courts, consultation on legislation and due process (*WOJ* 168) over elective democracy which is, at best, a means by which these goods may sometimes be preserved. However, in distinguishing his defence of democracy from what he describes as the more ambitious accounts offered by Maritain and Reinhold Niebuhr I am not sure that he is not asserting that they were claiming more for their views on democracy than they in fact were. To that extent, and unusually for him, O'Donovan is shooting down straw men. The conclusion to chapter 10 actually comes in chapter 11, where O'Donovan writes: "the last word in legitimation [goes] to divine providence: if we have a functioning government, God has provided for our needs!" (*WOJ* 189).

In chapter 11, entitled "The Powers of Government," we see another nuancing of a previous O'Donovan view. Whereas he had strongly insisted on the unity of government, in this chapter he argues for a distinction between three different powers of government, which must be exercised in different ways and by differ-

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ent people. The chapter begins, however, with a development of O'Donovan's account of the relationship between natural law and human law. O'Donovan defines "Law" as "the reality that determines how we conduct ourselves … the order within the world that is given to us" (*WOJ* 189). This law is the prior reality behind any act of human law-giving (*WOJ* 190). Human government is therefore placed within the context of prior divine law-giving. In offering this account O'Donovan has made good his claim (in *Nations, States and Boundaries* at 127) that in terms of political theology the Augustinian and Thomist streams (divided as they are about the question of whether *government* is pre- or post-lapsarian) do not flow in separate channels but constantly intermingle.

O'Donovan distinguishes between the courts, which may interpret the law of God, natural and revealed, and the customary law of society (*WOJ* 192), and the legislative bodies of a polity. The third element of government O'Donovan defines as the provisory power. This "is the power of *prospective judgment*, the proper criterion of which is attributive justice" (*WOJ* 201). Its function is "to judge conditions as they arise, and provide for the further judgment of any occurrence that requires it, so that courts and legislature may be presented with their proper business in an orderly fashion." Preparing legislation, bureaucratic implementation of law, preparing cases for the courts and providing policing, all these activities O'Donovan groups under the provisory power.

In chapter 12 on "International Law" O'Donovan argues, on the one hand, that the international order is different from the ordinary political order in that it is not possible or proper for one agency to represent all the people of the world. This is for two reasons. On the one hand, it is because the people of the world are already formed into peoples, and those peoples are the largest representative political agencies. On the other hand, it is because God has already provided for representation of all the people of the world through the man Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, the international order is not a world without judgment because it is bounded by law, by the law of God, natural and revealed, as well as by customary *ius gentium*, treaties and conventions (*WOJ* 211). It is that prior law which gives force to the judgments of the international community (*WOJ* 218–19).

In Part III, O'Donovan turns from politics to ecclesiology and social theory. In effect, he asks what is the effect on political authority of the Church's understanding of herself, her mission and of the Christ to whom she bears witness. Chapter 13 is entitled "Judge Not!" O'Donovan argues that the cross challenges the *aesthetic* basis of representative rules and authorities, the *covenant with death* which the rules and authorities have made, and the *exclusion* by which the rules and authorities define their identities (*WOJ* 233). Yet this deconstruction of political authority does not lead, in O'Donovan's view, to the point of "formless dispersal of political power to all worthwhile human enterprises" (*WOJ* 234). Instead he sees *not judging* as a possibility only because political authority, if obeyed, brings closure to judgment (*WOJ* 235–36). On the one hand, the Church defers to secular judgment; on the other hand, she defers to the coming judgment of God (*WOJ* 238). The Church stands beyond political authority because she witnesses to "the created shape of human sociality" (*WOJ* 241) and looks forward "to the

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sociality of the human race gathered around the throne of God and of the Lamb" (*WOJ* 241).

O'Donovan's theme in chapter 14 is "Communication," a term which corresponds to *koinonia* and which he is using to mean fellowship, community and the things which we hold in common (*WOJ* 242). O'Donovan argues that "Human community is not a product of human foundation; it is a condition of being human, a gift of God" (*WOJ* 249). However, communication operates in different ways, depending on the function of a community. Schools and hospitals are run differently because they communicate different goods, the goods of learning and health care respectively (*WOJ* 251). These different spheres of communication are held together by "a unifying conception, a word that…relat[es] the rationale of each to the rationale of the others. This comprehensive word presents us with the whole that we call a 'society' " (*WOJ* 252).

In chapter 15, O'Donovan moves from reflecting on society to reflecting on the Church. He does so by conceiving of two models of society, the "Household and City" and asking in what respects the Church is like a *polis* and in what respects she is like an *oikos*. In the post-Pentecostal church he finds the Church resembling a *polis* in her meetings in the Temple and an *oikos* in her meals in the believers' households. Of particular significance for Church order is O'Donovan's insistence on the original unity of the Church and on her calling to witness to the unity of the eschatological community "that will live without structure or form other than the immediate presence of God and the Lamb in its midst" (*WOJ* 261).

The final chapter comes as something of a surprise. In it O'Donovan defends a conception of Christian individualism, not of the individual as a pre-political reality, but as a person who is able to reflect on their own place within society. For the Christian, such a stance can be taken because "the individual believer, filled with the Holy Spirit, participates directly and subjectively in the life of God" (*WOJ* 296). Such a person is able to be of service to society, precisely because in judging for themselves according to the dictates of his conscience, they perform conscientiously everything and more that society expects of them (*WOJ* 311). Such a person is also able to "bear within himself the full self-consciousness of the church's communicative vocation" (*WOJ* 317) and so to witness to Christ and be the visible church, though others err.

Time is needed to reflect on O'Donovan's work, and it is time well spent because it rewards careful attention. One observation may be ventured at this stage, however. In *The Desire of the Nations* O'Donovan appears wary of the term "the common good," but without an account of such an idea, how can judgment take shape? In his subsequent work, O'Donovan has moved from speaking in *The Common Objects of Love* of the goods which societies do in fact pursue, to talking expressly in *WOJ* of "the goods of social existence … justice, love, worship, and loyalty, etc., and ... the transcendent goods in which these are rooted" (*WOJ* 107). Communities, societies, are understood as having particular conceptions of the good and the right, particular responses to the moral order of reality (*WOJ* 140, 156), and it is these which political authority is called to defend.

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Yet all of this is done on the foundation of only one half of Romans 13:4. The function of government set out there is bifurcated. It is not just about condemning wrong but also about commending good. O'Donovan has strong reasons for avoiding talk of commending good if it leads to political authority dominating and directing all of society but it is not clear that this necessarily follows from allowing the other half of Romans 13:4 some weight, particularly if it is stressed that it is the function of the government to commend the good rather than to execute or define it exhaustively.

No doubt there are many other points of clarification to be sought. Precisely because of that, *The Ways of Judgment* is indispensable reading for anyone who claims to have anything more than a passing acquaintance with Christian political theology.

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Film Review

Finding an American Jesus in Film: A 2006 Retrospective[1]

In recent years, Evangelical Christianity has played a starring role in American political life. Whether it is the Evangelical's ability to swing elections or the increased presence of Evangelicals in places of power, as a group Evangelical Christians contribute significantly to the setting of the agenda within American political life. Despite their prominence, the portrayal of Evangelicalism within recent film indicates a broader cultural suspicion regarding the reception of this group within American culture as a whole. The films reviewed below help to explore the place of Evangelicalism within the cinematic imagination in the previous year.

Jesus Camp

Jesus Camp is a documentary which explores the latent militarism within a Pentecostal children's summer camp in the American upper-Midwest. It offers an informative yet disturbing look into how children at this summer camp are conscripted into a spiritual army and trained to crusade for the soul of American

1. In July of 2006 I moved back to my home in Seattle, Washington after spending four years in Scotland completing my PhD at the University of Glasgow. Living in the UK, working within British theology departments and worshipping in British churches has somewhat alienated me from what is often perceived to be the quirkiness of North American Christianity and its political implications. Now a stranger in my home country, I thought it timely and somewhat therapeutic to use this, my inaugural article as film reviewer for *Political Theology*, to reflect on the interchange between religion and politics in American film this year.

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political and cultural life. Whereas the serious nature of this film implores audiences to reflect on the potential danger of Evangelical (and in particular Pentecostal) activism, I wish to argue that the comedy *Talladega Nights* offers a more characteristic portrayal of popular evangelicalism in America today. Through satire and base humor, *Talladega Nights* depicts the shallow and isolationist ethos of right-wing American religion and points to the true object of Ultimate Concern in American public life – individual success.

Jesus Camp (2006, Magnolia Pictures) is the second offering in as many years from the documentary filmmaking duo Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing. As with their previous picture, *The Boys of Baraka* (2005), *Jesus Camp* uses the lives of young children to reflect the dominant social, religious and political ideologies of the communities to which these children belong. For those of us who live in the urban and coastal population centers of the nation, the religious and geographical object of the film may seem remote and unfamiliar. In Blue State America, the Midwest is often regarded as the flyover zone; a place best viewed from 30,000 feet when journeying from one coastal cultural center to the other. The filmmakers play to our preconceived notions of the homogeneity of the Midwest by offering lingering pans across the barren landscape. Yet, endless acres of soy beans and corn and depictions of semi-urban track housing and strip malls are intersected throughout the film by chaotic scenes of fervent prayer meetings, tongue-talking children, and revival-style conservative preaching. By juxtaposing these two images, the one banal and the other exotic, filmmakers Grady and Ewing undermine the viewer's pastoral preconceptions of the nation's heartland. *Jesus Camp* hopes to convince its audience that underneath the homogeneity of the Midwest there exists a subaltern community of Pentecostals who seek to indoctrinate their youngest members with distinctive spiritual piety, a belief in biblical literalism and conservative right-wing politics.

The film tells the story of the "Kids on Fire" Christian summer camp run in North Dakota by Pastor Becky Fisher. The camp offers spiritual and moral admonition to pre-teens and their families, and draws its membership from a deep reserve of Midwestern Pentecostals. The film not only offers audiences a rare look into the revivalistic frenzy of such camps, but we are also given insight into the everyday lives of several camp participants, before and following camp meetings, thus providing viewers with a privileged look into the values and intentions which underpin American Pentecostal activism.

Like most of the children profiled in the film, the eleven-year-old Tory is home schooled by her mother. Her interests include exercising the gift of prophesy, dance, and fighting against abortion. In one scene, we see her dancing for the camera in her bedroom, while listening to her favorite Christian rock band. She says that she loves "Christian heavy metal and rock and roll" because it has its "basis in Jesus" and is not based in the regular pop subjects of romance and heartbreak, which she says, as a Christian, "she's against." When she dances she says she can feel the Spirit, though she describes the temptation to "dance in the flesh" which is contrary to her desire to dance whilst putting the "focus on God." The phraseology she uses to describe her own inner-battle between

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the flesh and the Spirit and her uncharacteristic admission of moral failing (at least uncharacteristic for the eleven-year-old girls that I know) give her words a parroted feel. Tory, and the other children profiled by this movie, experience their childhoods through the moral and political concerns of their families and churches. They may still dance, watch movies, play sports, listen to music, and study subjects like science, math and literature; but they do so within a shadow-culture that is carefully monitored for its theological content. This culture is often impenetrable to those of us from the outside, so by giving us access to the cultural forms which indoctrinate Pentecostal children, the film allows us to begin the process of understanding how such a worldview can be developed and sustained. Though the scenes filmed within the Pentecostal prayer meetings are by far the most dramatic, those which focus on the domestic lives of families involved with the "Kids on Fire" camp offer us the most insight into Pentecostalism as a whole. Whether it's the anti-evolution curriculum taught to thirteen-year-old Levi (who off-handedly dismisses global warming as a political issue) or the depiction of twelve-year-old Rachael casually reading an evangelism tract for entertainment (followed by a painful scene of her nervously evangelizing a girl three times her age at a bowling alley), we begin to see the extent of their counter-cultural goods and practices.

The children at "Kids on Fire" summer camp are encouraged to focus their activist energies on the moral failings of American culture. They are called by Pastor Becky Fisher to rise up like an army and to resist the demonic powers which enslave secular popular culture. In particular, children are admonished to pray for the formation of a new theocracy, where Christian virtues are restored to all levels of government. A common refrain echoing through the third act of the film was a plea to God to bring about "righteous judges" who would overturn ungodly civil-liberties and bring about an end to abortion. Abortion, it would seem, is the premier moral failing of secular culture in the eyes of those portrayed in the film. The young dancer Tory is particularly affected by the abortion issue. Her face is featured in an image that is frequently used in the film's advertising campaign. At the climax of a lively prayer service where children are implored to pray against the rising tide of liberalism evidenced through the prevalence of abortion in America, the camera focuses on young Tory's face. We see her hands clasped, her chin lifted, and her clear youthful eyes glancing heavenwards. The audience witnesses the formation of tears which well up in her bright eyes and make virgin trails down her porcelain skin. It is an eerie sight which left me feeling a kind of voyeuristic guilt over peering too deeply into the manipulated emotional core of this young girl. Through the lives of children like Tory, we witness the impartation of their parents' religious and political ideologies, written on the blank slates of the young.

Though not a widely released film, *Jesus Camp* made a significant impact in the American cultural landscape. Ted Haggard, who was featured briefly in the film as a leading figure in Evangelicalism, strongly disapproved of the representation of Pentecostalism's militaristic rhetoric. In the film, children describe their willingness to die for Christ; Pastors frame the conflict between Christian and secular cultures

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as a kind of war; believers in the film consistently frame the present era in highly stylized eschatological imagery; and at many points, comparisons are made (both implicitly and explicitly) between Christian fundamentalists and Islamic extremists. Haggard has noted that the majority evangelicals have toned down the use of militant language since the tragedy of September 11th 2001. Moreover, the militaristic language used by Pentecostals is far more spiritualized than similar phraseology employed by Islamic extremists. The filmmakers would have us believe that those involved in the Christian cultural wars are as likely to participate in suicide bombing as their Middle-Eastern counterparts. Though the film offers us a very privileged insider's perspective into Pentecostal domesticity, the subtleties of Pentecostal symbolism – and more importantly the specific cultural hermeneutic of the group – is not sufficiently explored. I felt that in this regard, the film portrayed a parody form of Pentecostalism, which offers to the film's primarily liberal audience (myself included) an image of the fundamentalist Christian worldview which is consistent with our preconceived stereotypes of Christian fundamentalism.

Although certain nuances of the Pentecostal worldview are not fully developed, I found the film on the whole to be a very accurate depiction of this religious subculture. Having been in my own youth a Pentecostal who attended such camps and held on to such an eschatological infused ideology, I spent a good portion of my viewing of the film squirming in my seat shocked by such an uncanny portrait. For those who are uncertain as to why a Christian fundamentalist would want to adhere to such conservative political views on issues like the environment, same-sex unions, creationism, or the abortion controversy; seeing this film would provide a hearty introduction into what, from the outside, is often an unfathomable mindset. Though I recommend this film as a useful sociological tool, it is not without its drawbacks.

First, stylistically the film feels forced and choppy. The scene breaks, which are intended to juxtapose the relative calm of the upper-Midwest environment with the chaos of a Pentecostal church service, hinder the sense of continuity. Likewise, the inclusion of Air America radio host Mike Papantonio in the third act seemed out of place. The palette used for filming these scenes and his commentaries on fundamentalism seemed disconnected from what was otherwise a non-narrated arty-documentary film. Though in the broader context, this outspoken left-wing radio show host's views on American evangelicalism are exceedingly relevant, within the film his presence seemed like an unwieldy appendage.

Second, as with any documentary film made in an age of voyeuristic reality TV, it is tempting for filmmakers and audiences to treat such films as merely a venue for confirming their own suspicions about the film's subjects. Rather than a way of revealing a more accurate depiction of its subject, such documentaries can be degraded to mere spectacles that masquerade in the thinnest veil of unbiased access to a readily demonized subject matter. Certainly, *Jesus Camp* paints a shocking portrait of theological malpractice, psychological manipulation and political radicalism within a fundamentalist sect of middle-American Pentecostalism. Yet one has the feeling that the filmmakers approach their subjects with a *Borat*-esque interest in ironic mockery. I left the cinema feeling that the filmmakers at times attempted

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to depict these earnest Pentecostals as little more than rural simpletons and country-bumpkins. For this film to have been more than spectacle, further consideration should have given to the exploration of the Pentecostal worldview.

Talladega Nights

For the sake of contrast, I would like to briefly cite *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby* (2006) as an alternative expression of evangelical piety in America. Though Grady and Ewing would have us believe that Pentecostalism threatens the civil liberties so enjoyed by mainstream America, the depiction of Evangelical Christianity within *Talladega Nights* seems a far more accurate appraisal of the nation's spiritual condition. Far from being overrun with radicalized activist Christians, Evangelicals have so bought into the American ideology of success and prosperity that any kind of political activism has been satiated by the affluence of the American myth of success.

Talladega Nights is the second collaboration between actor Will Farrell and his *Saturday Night Live* colleague turned writer/director Adam McKay. McKay and Farrell last worked together on the set of *Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy* (2004) which, like the film reviewed here, satirized American popular culture by employing Will Farrell's innate knack for self-effacing buffoonery. Whereas *Anchorman* uses the trope of the local-TV celebrity to tackle issues of gender relations in the 1970s, *Talladega Nights* takes aim at the liberal-conservative divide in contemporary American culture by centering on the *sine qua non* of conservative right-wing culture, NASCAR racing.

The eponymous hero of the film, Ricky Bobby, is the incarnation of American conservative life. Ricky lives out the clichéd rags-to-riches American dream by working his way out of poverty and poor education into fame as a top-ranked NASCAR racer. What propels his success is an innate sense of his own god-given ability to race and to win: "If you're not first you're last." As a metonym for the American conservative male he is unabashedly patriotic (exhibited by his xenophobic hatred of the French) and excessively heterosexual. His racing rival, Jean Richard (played perfectly by Sasha Baron Cohen), is both French and gay, providing deliciously stereotypical tension between the simpleton protagonist and his worldly counterpoint.

Of course, the satirizing of American conservative culture would be incomplete if its religious undertones were not addressed as well. In a pivotal point in the film we come upon the now wealthy and successful Ricky Bobby sitting down to dinner with his wife, two children (both boys), elderly father-in-law and his boyhood friend Carl. This picture of family dining would, on the outset, seem to embody the spirit of American familial life which is centered on a shared meal between family, generations, and kin. This is the stuff of the myth of America's treasured family values – one family, one sexual orientation, one meal. Of course, this meal is taking place in a Will Farrell film where our assumptions about normalcy are set aflame by parody. Here, the parodical element makes itself clearly known through the following prayer.

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Carley (Ricky's wife): "Supper's ready! Come on y'all. I've been slaving over this for hours."
Camera pans over a table full of name-brand fast food. Pizza boxes, sacks of fast-food burgers and fries, and little containers of pre-made confections.

Ricky: "Dear lord baby Jesus or as our brothers to the south call you, Jesus, we thank you so much for this bountiful harvest of Domino's, KFC and the always delicious Taco Bell. I just want to take time to say thank you for my family: my two beautiful, beautiful handsome, striking sons Walker and Texas Ranger or T.R. as we call him and of course my red-hot smoking wife, Carley who is a stone-cold fox. Who if you were to rate her ass on 100, it would easily be a 94. Also wanna thank you for my best friend and teammate, Cal Naughton Jr." [...]

Ricky: "Dear Lord baby Jesus, we also thank you for my wife's father, Chip. We hope that you can use your magical baby Jesus powers to heal him and his horrible leg... Dear, tiny infant Jesus, we – "

Carley: "Hey, um, you know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up. You don't always have to call him, 'baby.' It's a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby."

Ricky: "Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grownup Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want."

Carley: "You know what I want? I want you to do this grace good, so that God will let us win tomorrow."

Ricky: "Dear tiny Jesus in your golden-fleece diapers, with your tiny, little, fat, balled-up fists pawing at the air..."

Chip: "He was a man. He had a beard."

Ricky: "Look, I like the baby version the best, do you hear me? I win the races and I get the money."

Carley: "Ricky, finish the damn grace."

Cal: "I like to picture Jesus in a Tuxedo T-shirt because it says, like, 'I wanna be formal, but I'm here to party too.' 'Cause I like to party, so I like my Jesus to party."

Walker: "I like to picture Jesus as a Ninja fighting off evil samurai."

Cal: "I like to think of Jesus, like, with giant eagle's wings and singing lead vocal for Lynyrd Skynyrd with, like, an angel band. And I'm in the front row and I'm hammered drunk."

Carley: "Hey, Cal? Why don't you just shut up?"

Cal: "Yes, ma'am."

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> Ricky: "Okay. Dear, 8-pound, 6-ounce, newborn infant Jesus, don't even know a word yet, just a little infant and so cuddly, but still omnipotent, we just thank you for all the races I've won and the 21.2 millions dollars – Whoo!"
>
> Cal: "Whoo!"
>
> Carley: "Whoo!"
>
> The kids: "Ow!"
>
> Ricky: "Love that money! – that I have accrued over this past season. Also due to a binding endorsement contract that stipulates I mention Powerade at each grace I just wanna say that Powerade is delicious and it cools you off on a hot summer day. And we look forward to Powerade's release of Mystic Mountain Blueberry. Thank you for all your power and your grace, dear baby God. Amen."
>
> Carley: "Amen."
>
> Cal: "Amen!"
>
> Ricky: "Let's dig in!"
>
> Cal: "That was a hell of a grace, man. You nailed that like a split hog!"
>
> Ricky: "I appreciate that. I'm not gonna lie to you, it felt good."

This brief scene perfectly captures the real spiritual orientation of American Evangelical culture. Rather than portraying Christians as a group armed with countercultural media and aimed at political activism, *Talladega Nights* offers us a portrait of Evangelical syncretism where all aspects of domestic and religious life have been sacrificed on the altar of convenience, success and consumerism. Far from the image of the warrior Jesus evoked in the prayers at "Kids on Fire" summer camp, the Jesus of *Talladega Nights* is cast in the image of pure domesticity. His incarnation is into the image or our own utility – made to best suit our needs. Rather than a Jesus who radically seeks to engage in cultural change, this Jesus is dressed in the image of our own popular culture: whether this is in the form of a Ninja, a party-animal, or a mystical baby clothed in a golden fleece diaper. Even the pious act of praying itself is made subject to commoditization, as part of Ricky's contract requires him to mention a sport's drink each time grace is spoken.

Although this is a film marketed to, and widely consumed by, the apolitical youth of America, *Talladega Nights* is a subversive satire of American machismo and religious sensibilities. The excessive glamorization of success and the myth of divinely provided prosperity are held up in the film as examples of the vapidity of America's right-wing ideology. For those of us who try to attend to the political, cultural and religious landscape of the West, the film provides us with an insightful parody of the state of religion within the popular imagination and offers an interesting counterpoint to the stereotyping of Pentecostalism within *Jesus Camp*.

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