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BOOK PROFILE: *THUMPIN' IT: THE USE AND ABUSE OF THE BIBLE IN TODAY'S PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS*, BY JACQUES BERLINERBLAU

Profile of: Berlinerblau, Jacques. *Thumpin' It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. x + 190 pp. \$16.95 (paper). ISBN-13: 978-0-664-23173-6.

Jacques Berlinerblau's timely book explores the way in which politics uses and exploits the Bible's "raw power." This conversational text is an interesting mix of American history, presidential history, criticism of biblical interpretation, and a discussion of the use of religious narratives in "today's presidential politics." While the text is not necessarily jarring in its diversity, it feels a bit more like a series of separate essays than a coherent text.

Berlinerblau begins the book with a discussion of the Bible in American history. Despite the Bible's seemingly central role in the early history of America, the author notes that: ". . . to the consternation of traditional protestants since the founding of the republic, *the Bible functions as little more than an icon*" (7, emphasis original). The final blow to the significance of the Bible in American life came with the Scopes trial in 1925. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century biblical importance increased once again through the work of evangelicals who were mobilized by Roe v. Wade.

Chapter One, "The Bible in American Politics: A Primer," outlines the basic rules for Biblical rhetoric: "Let this serve as a reminder that the use of the Bible in American political discourse is light not heavy, theatrical not substantive, and rhetorical as opposed to policy oriented. A public servant can thump away about 'biblical worldview' or what 'my Bible tells me' without any rationale or supporting evidence for these broad assertions" (21). This is primarily because the ways in which Americans view the Bible are nearly as diverse as Americans themselves. Consequently, depending on how one approaches the Bible, one can come away from it with vastly divergent interpretations on any number of hotly debated policy matters (e.g. gay marriage, abortion, foreign policy, slavery, temperance, poverty, etc.). Perhaps one of the more significant sections of the book is the author's attempt to examine the terms that academics (and the press) use to define the various groups and the means of their biblical interpretation. These include: liberal protestant, conservative protestant, evangelical, green evangelical, progressive-evangelicals, swing or freestyle evangelicals, evangelical mainstream, Catholic, liberal Catholic, and conservative Catholic. While these groups have porous borders they do all denote differing approaches to biblical interpretation. Berlinerblau observes the difficulties that accompany putting these labels on specific groups, but also seems to be unable to avoid doing it

himself. The result of these various interpretive methods is that politicians need to be very careful in their use of the Bible, and avoid using it in a way that is seen as inconsistent with voters' own interpretations.

Climate change is a current issue wherein even "mainline Protestants" are beginning to disagree with each other, and is the focus of chapter Two: "The Bible and the Environment: Evangelicals discover the environment and Democrats discover Evangelicals." The author notes that this is one of the major areas in which the Democrats might be able to make inroads with the evangelical community, as some evangelicals are beginning to share views on environmental issues that have typically been in the arena of the left. During this discussion Berlinerblau introduces an important distinction between two means by which politicians use the Bible: the "Generic" and the "Cite and Run." The generic method invokes the "Biblical Worldview," or "The Bible says" without dealing with any specifics. On the other hand the "Cite and Run" method uses a more specific biblical passage. He notes that: "Brevity is the essence of the cite-and-run method. Under no circumstances is the politician to question or engage in any sort of analysis of those biblical texts that allegedly validate his or her position" (44). The citation is made, with the implication that it supports the point being made by the speaker, and then quickly abandoned. Berlinerblau is critical of both methods, as they imply that there is only one correct interpretation of the passage or "Biblical world view." Both methods also ignore the complexities of the information that Bible presents on any one topic.

The next two chapters go on to discuss the complexities found in two of these issues. In "The Blastocyst and the Bible: Stem cell research, abortion, and the silence of scripture," Berlinerblau examines the main biblical passages that are used to argue against abortion (i.e. Gen 1:27, Psalm 139:13-16, Jer 1:5, and Ish 49:1).<sup>1</sup> Due to the ambiguity of these passages the author observes that Evangelicals may be letting their politics influence their interpretation of scripture and not the other way around. Chapter Four looks at: "The Bible and International Relations: A foreign policy in Christ." Here the author is critical of the complaint by "blue-statists" that evangelicals are running the Bush foreign policy, with specifically apocalyptic goals in mind.

After this extended introduction, Berlinerblau moves on to Part Two, "Rhetoric and Religious Imaging," which contains the majority of his analysis of the modern uses of the Bible in Presidential politics. Chapter Five discusses what he terms "The good, the bad and the ugly" in presidential hopefuls' use of the Bible. In this case the "good" use of the Bible, is that which adds to the campaign and is combined with victory in the election. The biblical usage is kept sparse, positive, vague, shallow, and veiled. The "bad" then is that which takes away from the campaign and leads away from victory, and often avoids the five key

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<sup>1</sup> One possible problem here is that he uses his own translation for these texts. While this is good scholarship, it is not the translation that the evangelicals or the politicians themselves would be using. It is also interesting to note that Ex 21:22ff was not included as this passage explicitly deals with fetal injury.

characteristics of the “Good.” Finally the “ugly” is, “any type of speech in which the *entire* content of the address and/or argument is predicated on biblical verses” (79).

Chapter Six moves on to look more closely at both how the (then) current Democratic candidates discussed the Bible and to examine how significant the secular vote actually is. Regarding the latter, Berlinerblau contends that the number of avid secularists with no religious affiliation is so low as to be electorally insignificant. He estimates that the number of atheists and agnostics are no more than eight or nine million nation wide, and possibly as few as two million. The three major Democratic candidates (Clinton, Edwards, and Obama) are aware of this and no longer court the secularists as strongly as in the “good old days of McGovern and Dukakis” (111), leading to a blurring of the church/state lines which once were quite sharp. While Democrats may be leaning closer to their religious constituents, Berlinerblau argues in Chapter Seven that none of the three Republican frontrunners are all that attractive to their evangelical base. Indeed Giuliani (according to the author) is an imperfect Catholic at best, McCain has no real history with Evangelicals, and Romney is Mormon.

Berlinerblau concludes that despite the fact that “the Bible is back!” there is little chance that the Bible will play any real role in American politics. This assurance comes from the history of secularism in America, the First Amendment, as well as the fact that American Protestantism will never agree on exactly what the Bible’s role should be. Consequently, though the rhetorical use of the Bible is becoming more sophisticated and more prevalent, it has little effect on policy.

While this is an entertaining book to read, it is more like after dinner conversation than a focused text. There is no doubt that Berlinerblau knows what he is discussing, and the reader comes away from the book with a better understanding of both the history of the Bible in American politics as well of the relationship of current presidential candidates with their religious past. However, the focus of the text seems to be a bit ephemeral, shifting from one interesting point to another. Within this shifting landscape, Berlinerblau is able to problematize several terms (e.g. evangelical, apocalyptic, secular, etc.), which have become common in the media and academic scholarship. Berlinerblau also does an admirable job of keeping his own politics out of the discourse, and successfully highlights the way in which the “raw power” of the bible is harnessed politically even while the savvy politician glosses over the details and complexities of the biblical text completely.

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Morehouse, Nathaniel. "Book Profile: *Thumpin' It: The Use and Abuse of the Bible in Today's Presidential Politics*, by Jacques Berlinerblau," in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 9 no. 3 (Fall 2008): 96.