

Book Review: Christian: The Politics of a Word in America by Matthew Bowman

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Bowman, Matthew. *Christian: The Politics of a Word in America*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 2018. 320 pages. Hardcover, \$29.95.

Writing the history of a foundational concept or term can be an inviting challenge for any historian. Eric Foner's history of liberty and Nancy Isenberg's history of class are well regarded today because they make clear, informative narratives out of inherently abstract topics. Matthew Bowman, Associate Professor of History and Religion at Claremont Graduate University, is attempting to follow in their footsteps with his latest book, *Christian: The Politics of a Word in America*. Drawing on writings from the past two centuries, Bowman has created a work that is both informative and highly relevant to our current period, when Christian leaders are reappraising what kinds of politicians they want to support.

Bowman's goal is to dissect the role of Christianity in American politics and show how different groups, such as Catholics, white evangelicals, and African Americans, have used the term for their own ends. To achieve this daunting task, Bowman describes moments when groups argued that they were applying Christianity to guide the nation's political system and solve its problems. Bowman frames Christianity in opposition to the idea of "materialism," which appears again and again as the antagonist of the Christian politician. He defines materialism as an amorphous rejection of religion, an ideology that "denied the metaphysical claims of Christianity and hence threatened to corrupt the civilization Christianity had built" (p. 8). The materialist is obsessed with status, money, or power. Bowman's subjects find materialism everywhere, from the corruption of Ulysses S. Grant's administration to the white supremacy of race riots and the "secular humanists" of the 1960s. This approach helps ground Bowman's argument and provides a neat framework for an otherwise unwieldy topic.

Bowman is at his best when he is describing concepts that are unfamiliar to much of his audience. His analyses of Victoria Woodhull's presidential campaign, African American

Christianity in the early twentieth century, and the tension between cults and evangelicals in the 1970s are all clearly argued and riveting to follow. Part of the appeal of these sections comes from the author's ability to add literary flourish to his narrative. For instance, Bowman begins each chapter with a literary description of a scene or encounter that introduces a key setting or a major player, such as Victoria Woodhull's "simply cut black velvet dress" (p. 13) or Martin Luther King Jr.'s sore throat (p. 133).

Bowman's analysis falters somewhat when he describes the periods of consensus in the American approach to Christianity. While he certainly intends to tell a definitive story of the religion's impact in the United States, his interest in dissension and debate lead him into some confusing and glaring omissions. For instance, Bowman omits the first seven decades of the country's religious history, barely mentioning the Second Great Awakening or the utopian societies of the 1830s and 1840s. He covers all of antebellum Christianity with a few references to Tocqueville and a sentence on Emerson. Bowman also stumbles through discussions of traditional religious institutions and figures. His section on the Commission on American Citizenship drags, and his treatment of Reinhold Niebuhr is cursory at best. While these periods and people may not interest Bowman, they are still pivotal parts of American religious history and need proper treatment in a book with so ambitious a goal.

The question of Christianity will continue to influence American politics for the foreseeable future. Bowman is wise to both begin and end his book with a discussion of Donald Trump and his complicated relationship to the evangelical community. The ways in which evangelicals rationalize their role in the Republican Party has fascinated millions of Americans who would definitely be interested in this book. Bowman's book also appeals to those who want to read about intellectual history, the history of American religion, or American history in total. Its

dense prose and well-grounded arguments appeal to a scholarly audience, while it has just enough narrative detail and familiar characters to find some readers among the general public. In short, it is impossible to know the role of Christianity in American political life without knowing the story Bowman tells in this book.

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