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George Lundskow and Sarah MacMillen, *Qanon and Other Replacement Realities: How Religious Emotion Threatens Free Society but Can Also Contribute to A Progressive Future*. Boulder: Lexington Books, 2023

Reviewed by Daniel Burston

George Lundskow and Sarah MacMillen, the authors of this book are gifted sociologists who bring a unique perspective to the study of religion, Qanon and conspiracy theories in general. They are Christian humanists and socialists, whose counterparts in the psychoanalytic world include kindred spirits like Donald Carveth, Stanley Leavy, Karl Stern and Oscar Pfister (among others). While not a psychoanalytic book, psychoanalysts can learn much from it, as it deals with issues that loom large among analysts concerned with contemporary culture and politics – authoritarianism, conspiracy theories and the role played by religion in promoting or counteracting anti-democratic beliefs and norms of behavior. Their illuminating reflections are leavened with an excellent grasp of classical sociological theory – Tönnies, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel – and inspiration from more recent (Christian) thinkers, including Jacques Ellul and Charles Taylor, with frequent nods to C.S. Lewis, G.K Chesterton and early observers of American democracy like de Tocqueville and Thomas Paine. Alighting on a “middle way” between these two early and influential thinkers, whose pluralistic and non-dogmatic religious sensibility they celebrate, the authors argue that religion should furnish the “background hum” of purposeful civic engagement; that the best guarantee of religious liberty, diversity and fellowship is in fact a firm separation between Church and State; that in the absence of such, modern society tilts inevitably away from democracy and towards theocracy and authoritarianism.

There is also a distinctly Marxist dimension to some of their musings about contemporary American life. For example, they write:

. . . class configures one of the most dominant hierarchies in the United States – like in all modern capitalist countries – but in contrast to its peers, American social identity focuses much more strongly on race/ethnicity and gender, which are status rather than material hierarchies, but have material consequences, but which have material consequences in terms of economic, educational and other opportunities. This leaves class hierarchy relatively unquestioned, and changes battles over workplace conditions, hiring opportunities, promotion, wages, benefits and jo security into conflicts about ethnicity and gender rights rather than conflicts about the ownership and control of productive resources. With the class hierarchy unchallenged, Americans battle over who will ascend the hierarchy, rather than a broader distribution of wealth of the legitimacy of the vast wealth inequality in the first place. It reminds us of an old joke: For conservatives, 10 white heterosexual males will eventually own everything. For liberals, 10 people will own everything, except that four will be women, one Trans, three will be Hispanic, two black and one Asian. (p. 3)

Another feature of contemporary culture that they call attention to is the rise of postmodernism, which emerged in tandem with the internet and the digital age. Indeed, they attribute many of Qanon’s most striking features – including its ability to absorb and re-direct many older conspiracy theories in an eclectic, crowd-pleasing fashion; a conspiracist’s buffet, where customers cheerfully chose the items that they wish to consume while ignoring other, equally conspicuous offerings – to the impact of these social and cultural changes. They write that postmodern religiosity is self-seeking and self-focused yet lacks the reflexive dimension enjoined by the Delphic injunction “Know thyself!” which - like Carveth, Leavy, Stern and Pfister - they deem to be integral to an authentic Christianity. And as a result, they say:

The loss of collective meaning means the loss of collective identity and responsibility, and this vacates responsibility beyond the individual, preempts calls for active agency to promote grace in the world, and establishes a postmodern eschatology that moves people away from stewards of creation and agents of hope and transformation and toward domineering exploiters and oppressors (p. 71).

They also note that:

In this view, the Second Coming will be about righteous vengeance, us-versus-them them taunts against the stranger, rather than a move toward universal salvation or seeing God’s presence revealed. (p.71)

Understandably, perhaps, Freud gets short shrift in their discussions of religion. But among the psychoanalytic authors whom they do address, Erich Fromm stands head and shoulders above the rest. Indeed, in the opening chapters, they explicitly endorse Fromm’s values-centered (but admittedly somewhat contentious) concept of religion as a framework of orientation and devotion, one which need not entail any elements of supernaturalism (Freud notwithstanding). So, for example, they say:

. . . the question is not whether or not a culture has a religion, but what kind? Does it promote egalitarian unity, or hierarchy and domination? Cooperation or competition? Sociologically, what values does a religion embody, and what type of social relations does it envision? (p. 74)

As their book unfolds, other psychoanalytically informed social theorists like Theodor Adorno, David Riesmann, Christopher Lasch also put in brief appearances. Significantly, however, C.G. Jung and Jacques Lacan, are strongly reproached here for their antisemitism. The authors note that antisemitism, an ancient conspiracy theory originally rooted in theological prejudices, now shows up in secular culture in various forms. For example, they write:

The Labor Party in Great Britain, for example, often claimed alleged Jewish influence to undermine unions (whereas in the United States, the Jews allegedly fund labor unions to challenge the meritocratic and white order with immigrant workers) and the work of the French psychoanalytic superstar, Jacques Lacan, who revived the eternal racial memory concept from psychologist Carl Jung and the concept of ‘the One’ who arises to move history forward from philosopher Martin Heidegger - both of whom belonged to the Nazi Party. Even if we consider people like Jung and Heidegger as intellectually elitist rather than racist Nazis (a dubious distinction) concepts such as racial memory nevertheless reinforce the simplistic and irreconcilable ingroup-outgroup confrontation . . . only the great leader . . . can break (pp. 69-70).

Unfortunately, these statements are somewhat confused and confusing, and warrant clarification. The British Labor Party’s historic antisemitism and their American counter-examples both merit far more attention than a stark juxtaposition in the space of merely half a sentence can possibly provide! The authors could have dwelt on this subject at much greater length, devoting a paragraph to each of them, and without attempting to forge a tenuous link between these disturbing (and ongoing) problems and the ideas of Jung and Lacan. That said, there are indeed very strong undercurrents of antisemitism in the thought of C.G. Jung and Jacques Lacan. (See, e.g. Burston, 2020, chapter 3; Burston, 2021). But unlike Heidegger, Jung never belonged to the Nazi Party, despite having many admirers among the Nazis. Indeed, he distanced himself quite forcefully from the Nazis in 1937 and provided intelligence about the Nazi brass to the OSS during WWII (Bair, 2000). Moreover, Heidegger was an unrepentant (if somewhat unconventional) Nazi and a fierce antisemite who never apologized for his role in promoting Hitler’s mind-boggling depravity (Burston and Frie, 2006), while Jung was a high brow, low intensity antisemite who apologized in person to his Jewish friends and followers after WWII (Burston, 2021). Finally, it is doubtful that Lacan was influenced much by Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious, drawing instead on other sources. Yes, he borrowed much from Heidegger and others, but he despised Jung, after all.

That said, the issue of antisemitism is taken up in a more illuminating and consequential way in connection with the authors’ reflections on the relationship between antisemitism, on the one hand, and authoritarianism and conspiracy theories on the other. Indeed, the intimate and intricate interconnections among these three trends – and the dangers they pose to democratic societies – are at the heart of their inquiry. Qanon is particularly disturbing because the sense of grievance it fosters flourishes in the middle and higher-income levels of American society, and not only among “losers” who were betrayed by the failure of the American dream. Many of its adherents are college educated and/or retired. Nevertheless, it combines authoritarianism, antisemitism and conspiracy theories – and by implication, a deep-seated fear of the “Other” - with elements of apocalyptic thinking, a Gnostic penchant for “secret knowledge” known only to adepts and charismatic leadership, rendering it a “pseudo-religion” which produces an “ersatz community”; one that crosses class lines, and is driven by fear, despair and a sweeping irrationalism that is impervious to critique and lacks the virtues of authentic Christianity. In their words:

. . . conspiratorial thinking undermines democracy not just because it is emotional, impassioned or irrational. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” was deeply impassioned, emotional and it appealed to the anti-instrumental irrational pathos element in humankind. It targeted the worldview of a Christian audience’s sense of charity and love to work against corrupt mechanisms of elite power. For Dr. King, Christian love is profoundly against the world’s form of power structures that calculatingly drive us and our all-too American vice of selfishness. MLK’s emotional prose was provocative, yes, but also inclusive, community-driven and deeply hopeful (pp. 161-162).

My only complaint with this learned, impassioned and surprisingly hopeful book is that the authors do not always unpack the implications of their own insights. In fairness, perhaps, no one can say everything at once. But the progressive American shift away from class-based politics to one that emphasizes racial and gender hierarchies (which they refer to jokingly, in passing) combined with the Left’s embrace of postmodernism has weakened the American Left politically, alienating the working class, producing pockets of Left-wing authoritarianism and antisemitism that disfigure many of the progressive movements towards racial and gender equality that they value. Moreover, though the authors do a splendid job addressing Right wing authoritarianism which, by all accounts, remains by far the greater threat to democracy, there is also a growing literature on Left-wing authoritarianism and the “dark tetrad” of traits that psychologists associate with a penchant for violence (Conway et al 2017; Costello et al., 2021; Krispzenz & Bertrams, 2023). Though it has yet to be addressed and studied empirically, there is clearly a link between these “dark” personality traits and Left-wing antisemitism, which is expressed in the Left’s frequent embrace of Islamist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah; organizations that are violent, demonstrably antisemitic (as well as anti-Zionist and anti-Western) and authoritarian to the core.

And if it wasn’t evident before, this problem surfaced with alarming clarity and forcefulness in the immediate aftermath the October 7 massacre of Israeli civilians by Hamas. Before Israel launched the dreadful retaliatory measures that are currently grabbing headlines, many on the Left celebrated this horrifying pogrom as the first phase of “decolonization”, rather than greeting it with a frank and forceful condemnation. Oddly enough, many of these same people would probably insist that they are not antisemitic, but merely anti-Zionist, and many members of progressive organizations today either lack the courage or the clarity to address this problem for fear of ostracism (or worse). Nevertheless, Left wing authoritarianism and antisemitism are growing problems that need to be addressed openly, and soon, if we’re to avoid an even steeper descent into inter-communal and inter-religious violence and cultivate hope for a better future.

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