The contribution of the black pastorate to America’s social conscience is surely incalculable. Apart from the countless Sunday sermons preached from the pulpits of African-American congregations since even before the founding of the first African-American church in Philadelphia in 1787, the history of the black clergy has extended beyond the pulpit to include a public presence and social activism that emphasized black personhood from within the community and challenged the larger culture to reflect on, reassess, and ultimately reject its own prejudices, biases and, indeed, its racism. The civil rights era of the 1950s to 1960s represents perhaps the most visible era for the leadership of black pastors with names like King, Lowery and Abernathy proclaiming the gospel of social justice and driving the public dialog. And yet other voices unquestionably did contribute to the dialog and our understanding of the importance of the black civil rights movement in America is enriched that much more when such narratives emerge. Adam Bond’s *The Imposing Preacher: Samuel Dewitt Proctor and Black Public Faith* presents the reader with just such a narrative, engaging the life and work of one of the more influential but less well-known figures in the modern post-civil rights era. Proctor’s name emerges in only the most thorough analyses of the civil rights movement in America. And yet, he was close to Martin Luther King, Jr., served in the administration of the Peace
Corps during the Kennedy administration, and was an advisor to Lyndon Johnson’s Office of Economic Opportunity during his administration’s War on Poverty. Proctor’s was indeed a public faith and Bond contributes significantly to the scholarship by providing a comprehensive study of the theological and ideological foundations to his thought and life.

Bond introduces the reader to Proctor in fairly straightforward fashion. Key to his analysis is that Proctor represents a departure from the more frequently chronicled expressions of black theology. As such he positions him along a spectrum of more well-known figures and systems of thought. The writings of James Cone, for instance, represent the left on Bond’s conceptual spectrum. Cone’s is a black public theology steeped in the language of power and emancipation, advocating a strong emphasis on black consciousness and the right for blacks to free themselves from white oppression “by whatever means black people deem necessary” (12). The other end of the spectrum is represented by the black evangelical and biblical literalist E.V. Hill who opposed the sometimes confrontational methods and aims of Cone, describing his work as “blackism” and deeming it essentially idolatrous (21). Proctor viewed himself as something of a bridge figure or “pragmatic harmonizer” (10) who aimed to uplift the condition of the black community in America, a condition he saw to be largely the byproduct of white privilege. Yet at the same time he saw that within the great documents and best spirit of the American system there existed the best possible means for bringing about this much-needed change.

Chapters 2 and 3 are largely biographical in nature, chronicling the cultural and intellectual soil from which Proctor’s ideas about the public nature of faith first took root. To be sure, Proctor’s was a quintessentially Afro-Baptist experience. A churchgoing and especially supportive upbringing in Norfolk, Va. gave over to a theological education that included Crozer Theological Seminary, Yale Divinity School and finally, to Boston University School of Theology where such figures as Harry Emerson Fosdick and Reinhold Niehbur helped coalesce the churchly piety of his upbringing with his more critical theological pursuits into a theology that eventuated in “a black public faith that sought to transform society for African Americans and other marginalized persons in the world” (75). Proctor synthesized with relative ease the traditional theology and spirituality he heard at the Bank Street Baptist Church of his youth with the liberal theological categories of his later academic experience. This synthesis proved to be crucial to his long public career.

The last half of the book embodies the core of Bond’s argument. If Proctor’s life growing up was typical of the black experience in America during the first half of the 20th century—and it was—his experience in the church and his education provided him with the practical and theoretical basis upon which
to build a model of addressing the institutionalized racism that burdened not only his community but the entire American culture. A seminal concern of Proctor’s was the question of black personhood, a subject he addressed in his work *The Young Negro in America*. Here he engaged in a historical-critical analysis of the history of the black experience in America, actively engaging institutional (the moral majority, school vouchers) and individual (Jerry Falwell) impediments to the realization of the promise of a fully realized black community in America. His famous sermon “Everybody is God’s Somebody” embodied the content of his call for true equality. The book’s final two chapters address the practical expressions of Proctor’s critical and theoretical analysis. As Bond puts it, Proctor’s was both a public and a pulpit theology. It was in the pulpit that the preacher really became a public theologian, engaging with and influencing public policy issues vital to his community (150). This message, if ultimately successful, would, Proctor believed, culminate in construction of what he called “genuine community” (179). The later part of Proctor’s career concentrates on defining and developing his notions of community. It is here where his liberal theological heritage emerges most explicitly. True community, Proctor concludes, can only emerge in a culture in which justice and selfless love reign, in which social impediments are removed at all levels of society, and racial estrangement is eliminated. This rather ambitious vision could only occur in a nation that recognized the fatherhood of God and the personhood of all. However realistic this vision may or may not have been, to his last, even with all its faults, Proctor viewed the American democratic experience as the likeliest incubator for such a lofty goal.

Bond’s *The Imposing Preacher* adds a much needed voice to the record of civil rights and public theology in America. This helpful work suggests that while in today’s sometimes rather partisan context Proctor’s views might be quickly dismissed as too moderate or centrist, that would be a mistake.

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