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Horizons / Volume 42 / Issue 01 / June 2015, pp 182 - 184
DOI: 10.1017/hor.2015.17, Published online: 21 May 2015

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0360966915000171

How to cite this article:

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Contemporary civil rights movement research has sometimes been criticized for focusing exclusively on national figures, such as Martin Luther King Jr. or Malcolm X, while ignoring the women and men who led the local protests and organizations that were essential to the movement’s success. Adam Bond’s study of Samuel DeWitt Proctor offers a detailed account of, if not strictly a local leader, at least one who did not achieve the notoriety of King or Malcolm. Proctor was an ordained preacher, teacher and scholar, college administrator, and political appointee to several high posts in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Bond does not merely chronicle Proctor’s life; instead (and more importantly), he situates his subject within the diverse context of black public faith that emerged in the years after the deaths of those two national leaders.

The book begins by discussing the broader dialogue about the “essential character and vocation of black public faith” (8). Bond highlights a variety
of voices in that dialogue, including James Cone, contemporary womanist writers, more conservative leaders like E. V. Hill (an ally of Billy Graham and Jerry Falwell), and such figures as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, both ordained ministers who have clothed activism in religious language without articulating the theological foundations of their approach to political engagement. Within these streams, Bond argues that Proctor represented a mediating figure. He was a “race man” who embraced the black social gospel tradition, but also viewed the attachment of race to theology as a temporary expediency that would disappear as the United States came to embrace fully its ideals of justice and freedom.

Much of the book itself consists in summarizing Proctor’s views of racial justice, tracing their roots to the influences of his black middle-class family of origin, his religious upbringing in the black Baptist church, and, especially, his involvement with institutions of higher learning that fell squarely within the American liberal theological tradition (Crozer Theological Seminary, Yale Divinity School, and the Boston University School of Theology). Bond highlights the essential optimism that ran through all of these influences, a belief that the injustices resulting from unequal opportunity would disappear as the barriers to black progress were removed. The book also enumerates the particular theological motifs from Proctor’s sermons and writings that legitimated this optimism: for example, the Bible as “spiritual resource for life” (18), God as “partner with humanity” (58), the Holy Spirit as “moral energy” (101), and the church as “advocate for society” (201). Running through all of Proctor’s work, Bond argues, is his conviction that the US economic and political system offered blacks the opportunity, through education and hard work, to overcome the injustices they suffered: “Proctor believed in the structural integrity of American democracy. He saw the failures in the execution of democratic principles, not in their ideals” (518). It is in response to this optimism that Bond levels his ultimate critique of Proctor’s public faith—that it naïvely embraced middle-class economic, social, and cultural values and overlooked the “power of willful sin in social forces such as capitalism and racism” (412). Bond concludes, “For Proctor, the immanence of the kingdom looked more like Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society than a heavenly city in John’s Apocalypse” (512).

Bond’s study is thorough and evenhanded in its treatment of its subject. Although the author’s detailed thematic analysis of Proctor’s sermons and writings may be of less interest to readers not specifically interested in Proctor himself, the book is nevertheless important for the way that it sheds light on the broader context of black religious activism after the heyday of the civil rights movement, identifying Proctor’s approach to social justice as one of several directions that black leaders followed after
King and Malcolm. Most importantly, Bond’s study poignantly captures the dilemma that black leaders seeking an end to racial injustice faced, between rejecting the US political and economic system, on the one hand, and naïvely accommodating themselves to, and ultimately being co-opted by, that system, on the other—either of which could mean disillusionment and the loss of agency and voice.

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