

Book Review

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove

Revolution of Values:

Reclaiming Public Faith for the Common Good

Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019. 201 pages.

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In the aftermath of Donald Trump’s unconventional albeit successful campaign for President in 2016, a considerable sector of the American public began to suffer a type of cognitive dissonance. The shock stemmed not only from the fact that the polls had so inaccurately predicted the will of the general public, but also that the Republican candidate, a man infamous for his dubious business ethics, extra-marital affairs, and suspected racism, was able to garner a coalition of evangelical support. How could Christians known for backing moral candidates have approved of such an immoral man? Was Trump’s election a sign of deeper moral problems within the so-called religious Right?

Author, preacher, and moral activist, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, believes the answer is a disturbing “yes.” His book, *Revolution of Values: Reclaiming Public Faith for the Common Good*, attempts to expose “the genocidal white supremacy and patriarchy that have compromised Christian witness throughout US history” (7). It argues that American evangelicals who look to the Bible for moral authority have in fact thoroughly misread it, wielding it instead as a weapon against the common values of equality and generosity in society. In conjunction with his critique of American evangelicalism, Wilson-Hartgrove demands that a moral revolution take place

in the church that “resists the false gods of Christian nationalism and rediscovers a biblical vision for justice and mercy in our common life”—a vision closely aligned with a recent and fast-growing wing of Liberal-Progressivism (8).

The author’s *modus operandi* is to use personal stories to prove that a white supremacist agenda undergirds evangelical public policy. His book reads like a series of vignettes, each recounting the experience of someone harmed by the “policy agenda of politicians who promised to stand for ‘biblical’ or traditional values” (6). With each successive chapter, the author compiles human stories as evidence to expose the immorality of immigration and voter I.D. laws, the capitalist system, women’s rights views, as well as America’s stance on climate change and war. Wilson-Hartgrove calls on Christians to re-read the Scriptures through the eyes of these oppressed minorities and to “reclaim the moral narrative” from white evangelicals who have coopted the Scriptures for their own nationalist goals (168).

The most convincing aspect of Wilson-Hartgrove’s book is his critique of the latent ‘Americanism’ that persists among many evangelicals. As the author illustrates, certain popular teachers routinely misinterpret the Scriptures, fostering notions of a civil religion that intertwines the fortunes of America with the destiny of the universal church. These religious leaders champion a form of American freewill individualism that leads

many evangelicals—well-intentioned or not—to downplay the communal plights and responsibilities of American society. Embracing American civil religion stems, in no small part, from bad theology.

Despite his valid critique of some disturbing trends in American evangelicalism, however, Wilson-Hartgrove's overall appeal for a revolution of values through the embracement of Liberal-Progressive values is not convincing.

A brief caveat before offering a critical assessment of the work: Reviewing a book of this kind poses a unique challenge, mainly because the author makes no effort to mask which side of the political spectrum he occupies. This lack of dispassionate objectivity nearly forces a reviewer to engage in lengthy debate where his own political worldview might differ. Because I have no intention of using this review as a platform for publicizing or defending my own political viewpoint, I will focus my comments on assessing the author's form of argument and analysis.

A noticeable problem with Wilson-Hartgrove's approach to the issues he treats is his lack of objective assessment. He relies almost exclusively on recent sources that align with his own political and moral sensibilities; his bibliography is riddled with web articles from mainstream, politically Left-leaning news outlets. Lacking from the book is a concerted effort to fairly evaluate the best representatives from the opposing side of the argument. The author portrays evangelical celebrities—those heavily criticized for their views, even within broader evangelical circles—as the most qualified representatives of Christian “conservatism,” although more biblical and trusted voices are readily available for consultation (e.g., Timothy Keller, a *New York Times* Bestselling Author of “Generous Justice”). This lack of critical

exchange with qualified representatives of both sides of the political and theological divide is very unsatisfying.

The author's overall case is also hindered by his failure to offer any compelling evidence that the religious Right actually occupies the commanding heights of moral influence in America today. It is difficult to accept his claims that the nation's current moral woes are mostly the result of evangelicals misreading Scripture, especially given the obvious proliferation of Liberal-Progressive thought within the most influential sectors of our society, including public schools and universities, the mainstream media, as well as the healthcare, sports, and entertainment industries. The author also leaves many moral stones untouched, betraying selective moral outrage in the matters he treats. For example, while his chapter on women's rights excoriates Christian insurance companies for refusing to cover ethically-dubious birth control options, he nevertheless urges readers to support many pro-choice organizations for their work in poor communities. Meanwhile, he fails to acknowledge the abject horrors of abortion clinics, including the murderous deceptions of Planned Parenthood, to be a significant moral blot on our nation's history. This kind of selective outrage pervades the book, hurting the author's moral credibility.

Finally, despite his legitimate critique of some evangelicals' mis-reading of Scripture, Wilson-Hartgrove engages in a fair amount of convenient eisegesis himself. The author routinely calls us to read the Bible anew through the experiences of the individuals about whom he writes. As a result, the Apostle Paul's inspired words about spiritual bondage prior to faith in Gal. 3:23, for example, are made to refer to the physical bondage of border walls and unjust immigration laws. Creative interpretations like

this—which make no account of the analogy of Scripture—fill the entire book. One is left to wonder why we should accept Wilson-Hartgrove’s interpretation over that of his opponents, since he is equally willing to play fast and loose with the plain teaching of Scripture.

In summary, although Wilson-Hartgrove tackles important moral and political issues that should be of concern to evangelical Christians today, the author’s strawman portrayals, selective moral outrage, and innovative exegesis significantly weaken the book’s main argument. His call for a complete moral revolution that embraces a Liberal-Progressive worldview falls short of rallying the troops.

