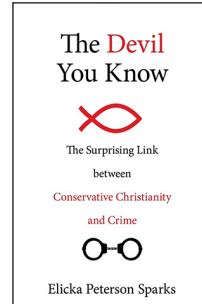


Book Review

Elicka Peterson Sparks.
*The Devil You Know: The Surprising Link between
Conservative Christianity and Crime*
Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2016.

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Most people, even the non-religious, believe that religion offers positive benefits to society. Just as the Santa Claus myth helps keep children in line, so religion helps reduce criminal behavior. Peterson Sparks, Associate Professor of Criminology at Appalachian State University, disputes that maxim that religion always reduces criminality. She suggests that the high rates of violence in the United States is due in part to the significant influence that “fundamentalist Christian ideology” has in and on American society (p. 14). Though her ire is directed against conservative, (i.e. biblical Christianity) in general, she is specifically concerned with a Christian subgroup she identifies as Christian Nationalists. Christian Nationalists, also known as dominionists and Christian Reconstruction, believe that America was founded as a Christian nation, the Bible is the inerrant word of God, Biblical jurisprudence should guide America’s justice system, and America must be restored from its fall into liberalism by returning to Christian principles. In short, Christian Nationalists march under the banners of faith, flag, and family. Peterson Sparks identifies several exemplars of the movement including some famous evangelicals, such as Charles Dobson’s Focus on the Family, the late Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority, D. James Kennedy’s Center

for Reclaiming America Alliance Defense Fund, David Barton’s WallBuilders, Rick Scarborough’s Vision America, and Lou Sheldon’s Traditional Values Coalition.

Peterson Sparks argues that Christian Nationalism spawns criminal behavior in several ways. First, Christian Nationalism’s support for violence, specifically the principle of retribution and force to coerce behavior deemed evil, encourages harsh punishments causing America to have high incarceration rates which in turn spawns social consequences to the prisoner and likely the families of those prisoners, though I didn’t see the latter point mentioned. Second, Christian Nationalism identifies groups and ideas as deserving of victimization. Third, Christian Nationalism’s belief in the afterlife thwarts the natural fear of death and therefore empowers activists to sacrifice themselves for the eternal cause. When all three principles are combined in an adherent, you have an aggressive soldier working for God and not afraid to suffer or die for the cause.

I found the book difficult to read not because of her writing style but because it is never easy to read comments that scorn, frequently mischaracterize, and fail to appreciate the rationale for foundational Christian beliefs. But my reading was also challenged by her difficulty in staying focused on Christian Nationalism. She kept switching her comments from Christian Nationalism to conservative Christianity,

to Fundamentalism, and to Evangelicalism. Granted these different groups share much in common but in theology, distinctions matter. Her inability to be sensitive of these distinctions was a significant flaw in her argument because it failed to properly define terms. She should have consulted with evangelical theologians to help her navigate between ideologies because they hold important distinctions that have practical consequences. Peterson Sparks seemed to be aware of her weakness on this point for after listing tenets of the Christian Nationalist movement, she states that all of them are not essential to membership (pp. 55-6). Fair enough, but how many can be dropped? For if the theocratic elements of the list are removed, while upholding a Christian's right to be involved in politics, then her criticisms would apply to conservative Christianity, a much larger group of people. Is she ultimately claiming that believing Christians cannot push for their values in politics because doing so ultimately causes violence and crime? Given her comments that secular societies have less crime, I think the answer is, yes. Unless of course, the religion supports ideas she likes such as abortion on demand, state support of alternative sexuality and genders, and opposition to retributive justice, particularly the death penalty.

She also fails on definitions when she lists beliefs and behaviors Christian Nationalists are more likely to hold and practice (pp. 94-97). For example she says that Christian Nationalists are more likely to support "gay bashing" and show prejudice against many racial, national, ethnic, and linguistic minorities. But what exactly is meant by "gay bashing" and prejudice? Is calling homosexuality a sin an example of "gay bashing" and opposition to illegal immigration an example of prejudice against minorities?

Failure to be more precise with her definition is a significant failing of this book.

Despite these and other weaknesses, I do think her concern over how certain self-professed Christians blend Christianity and nationalism is valid. While her idea does not achieve the status of being a theory because of its lack of sufficient evidence or precision, it is a working hypothesis, namely that conservative teaching when combined with politics can be a toxic mix. (See her list of six hypotheses on pages 101-103.) Scripture does warn about how power can allow our sinful desires to be manifest (e.g. David and Bathsheba). Power does not corrupt but it does allow the powerful to be less inhibited. I do think Christians must be careful not to identify their faith with a particular cultural or national expression. For example, the right to bear arms is an American cultural expression, not a Christian one in that Christ didn't mandate his followers to bear arms. Sometimes, Christians forget these distinctions in our efforts to get out the vote for candidates that we believe will protect our values etc. Of course, the question is how should Christians work in a pluralistic society to create a just society that is tolerant of Christian belief and practice while protecting the ability of those to live as non-Christians?

I also think that Peterson Sparks' use of Scripture should cause us to redouble our efforts to refute bad biblical interpretation. I could easily point out the numerous and very egregious examples of her non-contextual reading of the Bible, but that would miss the point. For I suspect that her treatment of Scripture simply mirrors the misuse she encountered from "Christians" in her Bible Belt context. As is common amongst critics of Christianity, they

are opposed to Christ's caricature because that is the only Christ they have encountered. We need to work hard to oppose erroneous thinking and behavior in the Church so that when people do criticize the faith, they reject the true faith not a polluted version.

In the final analysis, Peterson Sparks comments on Christianity and politics should be a warning for Christians to work harder to develop a theology of political engagement that is consistent with Christian teaching.

