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ZIMMERMAN, Y.C. *Other dreams of freedom: religion, sex, and human trafficking*. Oxford/New York: Oxford University, 2013. 214 p.

Yvonne Zimmerman makes an insightful and valuable case that the anti-human trafficking policies of the U.S. government, under George W. Bush, reflected Reformed Protestant theological ideas regarding sexual morality, gender and freedom:

the United States' global anti-trafficking project was transformed into a religious endeavor that aimed to impart a particular Protestant theological understanding of what freedom is and what freedom requires. Because ... the cessation of immoral (i.e., nonmarital) sex plays such a central role in this notion of freedom, correct sexual values became a high priority within the United States' anti-trafficking project and were even considered evidence of freedom itself. (p. 160)¹.

The book sits at the boundaries of feminist studies, policy studies, religious studies, and theology. It would be useful for graduate courses in, and is recommended for libraries serving programs in, any of these four areas.

Other dreams of freedom is inspired by, and to some extent echoes, Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pelligrini's book, *Love the sin* (2004). They suggested that

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¹ Unless otherwise identified, page references are to Zimmerman's book.

It's important for Americans to come to terms with the fact that Christianity, and often conservative Christianity, functions as the yardstick and measure of what counts as 'religion' and 'morality' in America. To be traditionally American is to be Christian in a certain way. (JAKOBSEN; PELLIGRINI, 2004, p. 13).

Jakobsen and Pelligrini analyzed various cases of moral regulation, especially regarding sexuality, and they argued that "the secular state's regulation of the sexual life of its citizens is actually religion by other means. Even the constitutional principle of church-state separation seems to give way when it comes to sex" (2004, p. 19). Another publication that explicitly prefigured and influenced the book was a recent article by Elizabeth Bernstein and Janet R. Jakobsen (2010). The authors looked at the case of human trafficking in order to argue that

the intertwining of religion and politics in the US comes from two sources: 1) the secular political and cultural institutions of American public life that have developed historically out of Protestantism, and which predominantly operate by presuming Protestant norms and values; and 2) the direct influence on US politics of religious groups and organisations. (BERNSTEIN; JAKOBSEN, 2010, p. 1023).

Zimmerman's book goes beyond these earlier works in two ways: it offers an in-depth analysis of that same issue (human trafficking) in order to explore in greater detail the ways that American policy has been shaped by implicit Protestant value assumptions; and it provides a more detailed historical account of the Protestant theological context and its relation to American moral culture. I will make a case that the former is valuable but that the latter is inadequately handled.

The book argues two broad claims. First "beyond the general civic values of personal and political freedom, the United States' federal anti-trafficking initiative also rises out of and is shaped by the religious heritage of American Protestantism" (p. 17). Second,

the way the Bush Administration turned to explicitly theological language to frame opposition to human trafficking ... implied a specific religious understanding of how particular enactments of gender and uses of sexuality embody morality and are constitutive of freedom. (p. 18).

The first chapter looks at the history and context of the United States' anti-trafficking legislation, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA),

which was signed into law by President Clinton in 2000. It makes a case that the problem and its proposed solution were framed in terms of Protestant moral sensibilities. It focuses on the political career and key ideas of Michael Horowitz, who was central in the development of the American policy of “trickle down abolition.” Zimmerman problematizes a series of blurred links or overlaps between different ideas. Religious freedom was seen as central to American identity, and freedom from human trafficking was closely linked to these, through two assumptions. First, sex trafficking was seen as the core problem: addressing this would trickle down to a more general eradication of human trafficking. Second, (in Horowitz’ words) “the explosive global spread of Christianity has made the paradigmatic Christian a *poor and brown third-world female*” (46; emphasis added by the author). These two conceptual moves effectively identified the primary referents of ‘Christian’ with those of ‘human trafficking victim.’ This implicit link between the issues of religious freedom and human trafficking set the stage for

a context in which ... Christian commitments could come to the fore so that ... the United States’ anti-trafficking project ... became a vehicle for the propagation of the substantive moral vision of evangelical Protestant Christianity, particularly with reference to sex and gender. (p. 51).

The second chapter analyzes the theological language used by the Bush administration, especially as shaped by speechwriter Michael Gerson and Republican congressman, John R. Miller, head of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. Zimmerman argues that American anti-human trafficking policies became predominantly a matter of regulating sexual activity in light of Protestant moral values: under Miller’s “leadership, individuals’ relationships with God became a central preoccupation in anti-trafficking work, and anti-trafficking work itself was rhetorically aligned with service to God” (p. 63). Miller stated explicitly, “The [anti-trafficking] message is that you cannot be a slave to man if you want to have a full relationship with God” (cited on p. 77). Theological rhetoric used the Exodus as a metaphor for framing trafficking as bondage to “evil.” The chapter also underlines the Christian bias and focus on women’s sexuality that were prominent in the faith-based initiatives established under the Bush administration: “the moral imperative that sustained the OFBCI [Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives] emerged out of the Bush administration’s skillful reframing of the material aspects of social problems as symptoms of personal spiritual problems” (p. 74).

The third chapter contextualizes these issues with an overview of the history of Christian theological views of sex, gender, and morality. Zimmer-

man reviews three key moments: the connection between sin and women's sexuality in Early Christianity; St. Augustine's view that changes in sexual behaviour mark the conversion from bondage to sin to "holy bondage" to the Will of God; and the Reformation emphasis on marital sex as normative. A constant theme throughout is held to have been "a sense that sexuality showcases the frailty of human fallenness especially intensely" (p. 99). The end result is that, "in Protestantism, sex, marriage, and morality are uniquely and inextricably linked" (p. 101).

The fourth chapter brings this historical work into focus through an exploration of the impact of Protestant theologies on the American cultural and moral imagination. Various characteristics are presented as "religiously Protestant" in historical origin and "characteristically American" in the USA today: "even those Americans whose religious affiliation is not Protestant – including those who are not Christian and those who are not religious at all – are still shaped by Protestant sensibilities" (p. 105). Zimmerman discusses a variety of such characteristics: thrift; industry; the centrality of sex to morality; the linkage of sexual morality and gender propriety; freedom as the capacity to submit to a moral code (linking individual conscience to divine norms); the romanticization of love-based marriage; the separation of gender spheres and the 'Cult of True Womanhood' (with these having a disproportionate impact on women of the lower classes and racial minorities). The scope of these characteristics is broad because a "process of historical amnesia ... has established a sort of symbiotic relationship in which thinking in Christian terms was both normalized and invisibilized" (p. 126; original emphasis). As a result, "cloaked in the semi-invisibility of 'American values,' Protestant conceptions of the interface between sex, gender, and morality profoundly shape the dominant U.S.-American moral imagination" (p. 127)².

The fifth chapter, titled "Bad Sex," cements the analysis with a detailed look at specific policy developments under the Bush administration. T-visas were granted to victims of trafficking but "good moral character" was a criterion of obtaining permanent resident status. This was defined in terms of "the core pillars of traditional American values, namely, religion, family, and work" (p. 133). Any engagement in the sex trade, especially prostitution, was proof that an individual lacked good moral character. The Prostitution Loyalty Oath denied federal funds to any organization that had not explici-

² Zimmerman, somewhat inconsistently, uses "U.S.-American" rather than "American." She believes that the latter term "is an affront to all our neighbors to the North and to the South in this hemisphere who warrant the term as much as do U.S. residents" (p. 183, n. 8). I maintain the standard usage.

tly agreed “that it does not promote, support, or advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution” (cited on p. 145). This administrative criterion

curtailed the kind of work that organizations could do with populations that are vulnerable to trafficking and ... [was] used as a pretense to defund organizations and programs that did not ascribe to the administration’s view of sexual morality. ... [T]he Bush administration selected anti-trafficking partners according to the sexual ideology they espoused. (p. 151).

This shifted emphasis from the core criteria of human trafficking (fraud, force, and coercion) to a particular conception of sexual morality.

The Conclusion offers a brief overview of developments under the first term of the Obama administration. Some things have changed: increased emphasis on labour trafficking; greater international cooperation; de-emphasis of faith-based organizations; and less explicitly theological rhetoric. Despite these changes, the “same basic moral imagination” remains at work (p. 171). Zimmerman then cites an important article by Janet R. Jakobsen (2005) that characterizes a distinctly modern sense of freedom as one that is rooted in the Protestant Reformation and inseparable from regulation. “Modern” exchange and sexual relations both presuppose forms of regulation, the market and marriage respectively: “regulation ... is internal to the meaning of modern freedom, including the meaning of sexual freedom” (JAKOBSEN, 2005, p. 286). Drawing on Jakobsen here allows Zimmerman to conclude that the Bush administration’s anti-trafficking project was framed almost exclusively as a matter of freeing women victims of sex trafficking, and the operative conception of “freedom” involved sexual regulation. This leads to Zimmerman’s final recommendation that we interrogate and imagine alternative to this modern sense of “freedom.” Her final words highlight “the challenge, and opportunity, of dreaming other dreams of freedom” (p. 182).

There are three general lessons to be learned from this valuable book, beyond the specific one that the Bush administration’s human trafficking project was shaped by a biased set of values. First, religiously motivated values shape not only general political discourses but also very specific policy developments. There is little attempt here to generalize this point beyond the case of human trafficking and none at all to look beyond the USA. But Zimmerman successfully models the close reading of discourses and developments in a very specific context, which is an important methodological contribution. Second, an overly narrow emphasis on sex trafficking, whether by politicians or feminists, may well be symptomatic of these or related distorting presuppositions. This reflects the initial question that motivated

Zimmerman's study: "I ... wondered why so much anti-trafficking rhetoric and action focuses on sex and particularly on trafficked women's sexual behavior" (p. 8). Paying attention to such gaps between rhetoric and reality is an important reminder for policy-makers, activists and scholars. Third, the concluding challenge to examine concepts of "freedom" in their historical and cultural contexts is valuable.

That concluding recommendation also highlights a fundamental weakness in the book's argument. The highly contextualized processes (historical, religious, political, social, national, cultural, etc.) that lead to "modern freedom" cannot be attributed so directly and uniquely to the Protestant Reformation.

In large part, this is because what Zimmerman calls "Protestantism" is already a very Americanized cultural form. Readers of this book outside the USA (and many Americans as well) would recognize the characteristics of "Protestantism" laid out in this book as more "American" than "Protestant." Similarly, non-American intellectuals – e.g., the Canadian writing this review and the Brazilians, most likely, reading it – tend to find it somewhat surprising when American scholars present as somehow innovative or radical the claim that American culture reflects Protestant values. That would be a bit like a Brazilian academic "discovering" that Brazilian culture has strong Catholic influences. That core claim, the one that grounds Zimmerman's book – like Jakobsen and Ann Pelligrini's (2004) before her – is that being American is related, at a general cultural level, to being Protestant. That is more obvious than analytically useful. It only seems operationalizable because a distorted static view of 'religion' is being used to set up Protestantism as an independent variable.

Zimmerman's argument works by taking Protestantism and culture as clearly distinct variables at certain points and as inseparably fused phenomena at others. When she writes, for example, of Reformation attitudes to marriage she argues, citing Jakobsen, that "as monastic life disbanded, marriage became the only socially legitimated expression of sexual freedom available to women"; the conclusion is "that modern freedom has narrowed the number of socially legitimated expressions of sexual freedom that are available to women" (p. 176-7). This sharp distinction between early Protestantism as cause and a much later "moral imagination" as effect is untenable. Just pointing out comparable characteristics in Europe several centuries ago and in the USA today does not establish any causal connection between them. Nor does drawing on just one thread from a broad fabric of historical developments that manifested themselves in distinct ways in distinct sectarian and national contexts. Here are two specific problems, among others that could be noted. First, this sort of historical over-generalization ignores some

very relevant facts for the historical periods in question, e.g., in the case just noted, the monastic life was not totally rejected by Protestants (e.g., nuns in the Church of England). More generally, there were still lots of non-Protestants around after the Reformation, even among Americans. Second, the historical analysis is too superficial to support the kind of causal claims that are made. Two brief chapters line up a few *ad hoc* characteristics from two thousand years of Christian theology: the only points mentioned are those that suit the argument.

At the same time, Zimmerman insists that “the coincidence of American and Protestant refers to the dominance of Protestantism as *cultural identity* within the American ethos, rather than to Protestantism as a consciously chosen *religious identity*” (p. 103-4; original emphasis). But, if this is so, then Protestantism is not an independent variable, the effect of which on “the American moral imagination” can be investigated (i.e., it is part of that “imagination,” not an analytically distinct causal influence). Zimmerman thus distances herself from what many readers would consider the actual issue at stake: the extent to which the values of the Christian right have influenced policy. By insisting that Protestantism is a diffused element of American culture today, one shared by all Americans, of any religious persuasion, Zimmerman is forced to appeal to historical developments for the causal link that her argument requires. (In this light, Bernstein and Jakobsen [2010], make a more nuanced argument, and Zimmerman herself seems actually to take this route in her first two chapters.)

In other words, Protestantism as cultural identity is portrayed in synchronic terms (today’s reality) and Protestantism as religious force is portrayed in diachronic terms (Reformation and Puritan influences): “gradually, these norms became more than simply Protestant *religious* views of marriage and gender. Carried largely by the white middle class, they were infused into the center of American culture, where they eventually *became* American culture” (p. 125). However, this simply begs the question of how this historical shift happened.

Zimmerman’s argument treats “Protestantism” (and religion more generally) as too monolithic and static a phenomenon. One could make just as persuasive a case that American culture appropriated, absorbed, cannibalized, or, in a word, shaped Protestantism as the reverse. The impact of this view on the book’s argument would be more intriguing than debilitating: the moral values influencing policy would need to be characterized as “mainstream American” rather than “Protestant.” The book’s view of American culture is, after all, overly monolithic. Zimmerman recognizes that women of lower classes and racial minorities are disproportionately affected by ideological views of gender, but she effectively negates cultural difference between

subordinate and dominant groups by insisting that all American share in the one “Protestant” identity. Moreover, in recommending an alternative conception of freedom, she herself argues for a counter-cultural stance. This raises an interesting question: is it perhaps more strategically effective for oppositional voices, like Zimmerman’s, to characterize themselves as standing against “Protestant” bias than “mainstream American” bias? From a certain perspective, this might justify – or at least distract attention from the gaps in – the inadequate and superficial work that has been done to portray Protestant theology as causally related to the values in question.

Zimmerman’s assertion (like that of Jakobsen before her) that Protestantism had a sort of mono-causal impact on American culture only seems obvious if we accept the mistaken premise that Protestantism is a static set of ideas passed down as an unyielding tradition. A more defensible analysis of the very dynamic inter-relations between Americanized Protestantism(s) – and other forms of Americanized religion – and American moral culture(s) would require much more nuanced and detailed historical and cross-cultural work. This work would ideally be more attentive to differences of region, race, class, ethnicity, generations and national origin within American society itself.

In sum, this book is an important and valuable study of concrete ways in which religiously influenced values (in broad terms) shape American public policy. The book’s view of the precise role that is to be attributed to religion *per se* is somewhat problematic. However, this does not undermine the main thesis: ideological biases were and are clearly present in American policy on human trafficking. The fact that Zimmerman does not sufficiently clarify the precise nature or cause of these is a spur to take up her challenge to do further thinking on these issues, not a serious weakness with her book.

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