

BOOK REVIEW: MEGAN GOODWIN (2020) ABUSING RELIGION: LITERARY PERSECUTION, SEX SCANDALS AND AMERICAN MINORITY RELIGIONS.

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Megan Goodwin (2020) *Abusing Religion: Literary Persecution, Sex Scandals, and American Minority Religions*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press.

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Megan Goodwin, visiting lecturer in Philosophy and Religion at Northeastern University in Boston Massachusetts and programme director of the 'Sacred Writes: Public Scholarship on Religion' project, presents in *Abusing Religion* three case studies of texts written about abuse within minority religions and the extent of the influence these books have had. *Abusing Religion* takes an extremely well-researched interdisciplinary approach and makes use of experts from sociology, religious studies, anthropology, gender studies, and other disciplines throughout. The text is divided into three parts, each focusing on one text: *Michelle Remembers* (1980), *Not Without My Daughter* (1987), and *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003). Each of these texts has influenced the American body politic as deeply as leading to changes in legislation, increased levels of othering and stereotyping, the rise in attacks on minority groups, and most significantly and worryingly the increased assumption that sexual abuse is endemic and prevalent in minority religious groups despite data showing that this is not the case.

The three case studies are bookended by detailed introductory and concluding chapters. Goodwin does a good job of introducing the material to the reader, making it accessible to those who may not

have read the books discussed in the case studies. In the introduction she coins the phrase 'contraceptive nationalism', which she defines as, 'a form of gendered white supremacist Christian nativism that minoritizes [sic] certain American religious traditions, compromising their legal protections, political influences, cultural cachet, and/or social credibility' (p3). Goodwin discusses how the American obsession with protecting white Christian bodies results in drawing attention away from the prevalence of sexual abuse that happens in mainstream America and diverts it to groups that do not fit into this category, leading to the narrative that sexual abuse is almost synonymous with minority religious groups and vice versa. Goodwin concludes that Americans would rather believe that sexual abuse occurs in weird cults than acknowledge that it could be occurring within their own community. On a number of occasions Goodwin points out that statistically, child sexual abuse is more likely to involve a family member than a stranger and is more prevalent in the general population than in minority religions.

Part One addresses the Satanic Panic that exploded in the 1980s following the publication of *Michelle Remembers*. In the book, Michelle Smith's childhood memories of ritual abuse are described

after being 'recovered' in a series of hypnotherapy sessions with her therapist Dr Lawrence Pazder. Goodwin explains how the techniques used to 'recover' the memories detailed in *Michelle Remembers* were later debunked by experts. Additionally, other cases of abuse reported by others were based on questionable interview techniques in which children were rewarded for giving the responses the interviewers were looking for, but admonished when they did not. Psychologists concluded that the techniques used resulted in false memories. Despite *Michelle Remembers* being widely discredited today, Goodwin argues that the damage has been done. The lasting effects of the Satanic Panic, after it was discovered it was not real, resulted in children being less likely to be believed in genuine abuse cases. The shock factor, Goodwin states, in ritual abuse stories eclipses those of typical domestic abuse, meaning that genuine cases have been ignored while authorities spent millions of dollars investigating false claims that could not be supported by physical or forensic evidence but were nevertheless featured heavily in the media.

In Part Two Goodwin examines *Not Without My Daughter* (1987), the story of Betty Mahmoody, a white American woman who married an Iranian doctor in America. Following a move to Iran with her husband she gives an account of domestic abuse and her escape with her daughter back to the United States. In a pre-9/11 and pre-Gulf War America, the book fuelled anti-Muslim and anti-Iranian rhetoric already heightened by the Iranian Hostage Crisis of 1979-1981, and caused an uptick in attacks on members of Muslim communities. Goodwin states that the text racialised Islam as non-white and portrayed Muslim men as a threat to white

American women; that in the book Mahmoody continually associates the violence she reports with her husband's religion and nationality, ignoring the fact that reports of domestic abuse and marital rape are also reported in American homes. Goodwin argues that the book and its subsequent influence has led to the false belief that foreign Muslim men are the biggest threat to the American body politic, whereas, in reality, white American men with guns have caused exponentially more deaths in America than Muslim extremists.

Part Three examines the Jon Krakauer's *Under the Banner of Heaven* (2003) which focuses on Mormon polygamy and the murders of Brenda and Erica Lafferty. Goodwin points out that throughout the text Krakauer confuses and conflates various Mormon traditions and theological understandings to conclude that sexual abuse is part of every polygynous relationship; that girls are groomed to accept sexual assault and boys are groomed to become predators. Goodwin discusses the negative impact the text has had on the American understanding of polygamy and involvement that Krakauer was allowed to have in the 2008 raid on the Yearning for Zion ranch in Eldorado, Texas and legislative changes. Goodwin points out that the author fails to interview a single woman who chooses to practice plural marriage or acknowledge that while sexual abuse has occurred in fundamentalist Mormon groups, it is by no means a hallmark of plural marriage. Yet, Krakauer was able to convince authorities that the narrative portrayed in his book was accurate, influencing the way authorities treated members of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints following the 2008 raid. Goodwin argues that as the result of the book, many Americans now believe that

fundamentalist Mormonism is defined by polygyny and in turn polygyny is defined by sexual abuse and many Americans will be unaware that only a small proportion of fundamentalist Mormons actually practice plural marriage, and a smaller number still experience sexual abuse.

While Goodwin does justice to identifying the lasting damage caused by the three books she includes as case studies, what is lacking is a detailed assessment of those involved from a modern-day perspective, which is particularly crucial when two of the three books were published over thirty years ago. Whilst Goodwin makes mention of the backlash and alternative narratives, there seems to be a missed opportunity in not reaching out to those involved to see how they view the impact of their involvement or to give voice to those ignored in texts and in the immediate aftermath of the publication of each of the books. For example, Goodwin frequently states that Krakauer never interviewed a single female polygamist who chose to enter into plural marriage, and while she does make use of ethnographic studies that give voice to these women, Goodwin also does not interview a single female polygamist.

However, this shortfall does open the book up to flexible classroom use in which students could be asked to first read the books used in the case studies, followed by the accompanying sections of *Abusing Religion* and then examine recent interviews of those involved in the case studies, and/or the work of experts who provided testimony in associated trials, and other 'lost voices'. Goodwin touches on cases of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church and points out that such abuse has bubbled under the surface for decades without legislators calling for legal changes in ways that were seen in

response to the three cases studies. Here is an opportunity for future research as well as issues that could be addressed and applied in a classroom setting tackling such issues.

This is a timely publication in light of the recent protests following the death of George Floyd in Minnesota earlier this year sparking a massive social justice and civil rights movement in the United States. It highlights the white supremacist Christian problem that America has which 'others' people of colour, foreigners, and minority religions. This results in minorities being ignored while white American Christian voices are listened to. Goodwin's 'contraceptive nationalism' can be seen today beyond the pages of this book and will undoubtedly form the basis of further research. As Goodwin concludes, 'religion does not cause abuse. But... religious belonging can make abusive situations and relationships harder to escape'. By responsibly educating the American public about cases of abuse, which the three texts discussed in her case studies fail to do, hopefully the American body politic can begin to better understand where abuse occurs and how it can be prevented, without endangering and othering those who belong to minority religious groups.

Biography

Philippa is a doctoral researcher in the Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Exeter. She researches the media representations of fundamentalist Mormon polygamy in the United States and how this looks in comparison to the realities of Mormon plural marriage as it is practiced in America today. ORCID: 0000-0002-6862-4093 Twitter: @philippajmeek