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The Divine Institution. White Evangelicalism's Politics of the Family by Sophie Bjork-James offers a compelling contribution to the rapidly evolving field of the anthropology of Christianity. This academic sub-field emerged in response to the rise of the religious right in the early 2000s, recently also focusing on white Christians who have significantly influenced the politicisation of Christianity (Schneider and Bjork-James 2020). This scholarly interest has intensified as Christian societies worldwide grapple with the impact of secularisation, globalisation, and capitalism (Schneider and Bjork-James 2020; Coleman and Hackett 2015; Radermacher and Schüler 2017).

Focusing on the United States, Bjork-James, alongside other scholars in the field, observed that particularly white evangelicals¹ exert a significant political influence, forming the foundation of the religious right and its conservative politics. These politics are especially shaped by racial, sexual, and gender-related concerns. Highlighting the centrality of race to the politics and worldviews of white evangelicals, Bjork-James argues that anthropological research must scrutinise the substantial number of right-wing voters and the rising racism and far-right extremism globally by making whiteness a more prominent subject in the studies of race and religion. In that sense, Bjork-James's work is innovative specifically in its criticism of the tendency of anthropology to ignore race as a category in studies of white Christianity. Whilst research on Black Christianity has consistently considered race as a critical factor, studies on white Christianity often ignore how whiteness shapes religious and political ideologies. Bjork-James argues that this oversight normalises whiteness and overlooks its influence on the conservative politics of the religious right, which is a dangerous omission (see also Schneider and Bjork-James 2020). As anthropological studies on Black Christianity have for a long time been including race as a social factor, the theories and concepts on this theme are far more advanced than in the study of white Christianity. Consequently, Bjork-James draws on concepts from these studies, primarily developed by scholars of colour, as a theoretical foundation for her analyses, adapting them to the different historical and social contexts of white Christians.

1 The author uses the lower case when referring to the social category of 'white' but capitalisation for the category 'Black'.

Central to Bjork-James's analysis is the argument that the politics of the family, a focal point for evangelicals, are deeply embedded in a worldview shaped by race and colonisation. Making this emphasis on the family the main subject of her research, she explores how both everyday religious practices and evangelical politics revolve around the family, with its inherent hierarchies and gender norms. By connecting these practices with political actions, she demonstrates that the evangelical movement enacts its beliefs about the family in both the private and the public spheres.

To fully grasp this emphasis on the family within the evangelical worldview, Bjork-James employs an intersectional approach derived from Black feminist studies. This approach highlights how the patriarchal nuclear family, seen as a divinely ordained ideal, intersects with other categories such as gender, race, and economics. This methodology is crucial for understanding the complex dynamics at play in evangelical family politics.

Bjork-James provides a vivid ethnographic account of Colorado Springs, frequently described as the 'Evangelical Vatican' (p. 26). This predominantly white, middle-class community features numerous megachurches and Bible study groups, presenting a harmonious yet insular social fabric. Over sixteen months, beginning in 2008, Bjork-James immersed herself in this community, attending sermons, listening to Christian radio, conducting about 100 interviews with evangelical leaders, pastors, and congregants, and participating in national conferences of the religious right. Through her detailed narrative, Bjork-James introduces her arguments with rich, illustrative language and intimate interviews with evangelicals and ex-evangelicals. The participatory observations she made in small-group Bible studies enable her to bridge the gap between everyday religious practices and broader political movements, providing a comprehensive understanding of how white evangelical family politics are influenced by historical and contemporary contexts.

Throughout the book, Bjork-James demonstrates how the nuclear family became central to the moral order of white evangelicals in Colorado Springs. This family model, shaped by distinct gender and sexual norms with race as a key factor, drives the movement's opposition to feminism, abortion, homosexuality, and the perceived decline of traditional masculinity. This logic also underpins Christian nationalism and white supremacy, which have become prominent subjects of scholarship, particularly since the presidency of Donald Trump (2016-2020).

To illuminate the dynamics between evangelical politics and their racial implications, the author provides a broad overview of the history of white evangelical politics: it originated not from a need to defend conservative politics of the family and gender but from opposition to the government's effort in the 1970s to racially desegregate the country. This disagreement was not merely about defending segregation but about protecting their culture from what they perceived as an 'overreaching secular state' (p. 34). After succeed-

ing with this political agenda at least on some levels, they shifted their focus towards family and gender values to defend their religious culture and worldview. An intersectional approach shows how this new political focus today is still partly shaped by race. Defending the family and its hierarchies involves opposing societal changes – perceived threats to the old social order – such as civil rights movements, evolving gender roles, and increasingly secular national politics.

This familial hierarchy and social order are defined by rigid gender roles, with male headship and female submission forming the core of what is known as the ‘Divine Order’ (p. 65). Male headship in particular is seen as essential to establishing a family that adheres to this ‘Divine Order’ (p. 65). The idea of the ideal father as leader of and provider for the family is reinforced by Christian media, bible study groups, and important evangelical activists. Those institutions and their defence of the heterosexual, patriarchal family not only serve to perpetuate patriarchal structures in lived evangelical practice but also support a specific nationalist and racist agenda. This is further justified by the fact that this God-given hierarchy within the family is crucial to national identity and foundational for a stable and moral United States.

The author analyses how evangelical politics of the family structure perceptions of homosexuality. To understand how evangelicals view homosexuality as antithetical to the ideal family, the author examines the ‘ex-gay movement’, where evangelicals claim to have overcome their homosexuality. The movement posits that ‘healing’ homosexuality is possible by enforcing a stronger gender identity in the individual, an identity which did not develop properly in the person’s childhood because of the lack of a stable gender identity in the individual’s parents. Thus, ideas of family and gender norms are closely linked to the political opposition to homosexuality. A central theoretical approach in this book as regards sexuality and sexual orientation is the concept of ‘white sexual politics’, which draws from the concept of ‘black sexual politics’ as coined by Patricia Hill Collins (2004: 85-88). This approach illustrates that the evangelical politics of family and heterosexuality have historically linked sexual purity to the strength of the nation, with an emphasis on sexual purity and gender ideals being closely tied to racism. This dynamic continues in the emphasis by modern white evangelicalism on heterosexuality and the patriarchal family. Through this concept, the author explores the historical and contemporary connections between sexual politics, racism, and nationalism within white evangelicalism in the United States.

In the final two chapters of the book, the author shifts her focus from the historical impact of racism on white evangelical politics to the future of these politics. She examines not only the evolving political agendas of younger generations of evangelicals but also the changing racial demographics of the country, which will undoubtedly influence the direction of white evangelical politics. However, the exact nature of this impact remains uncertain. No-

tably, the increasing presence of Asian and Latinx evangelicals in the United States is expected to alter the political landscape in the coming years. Research indicates that rising racial diversity may provoke greater racial hostility amongst white evangelicals, driven by fears of 'status threat', or the anxiety over losing dominant-group status, which has been significant amongst white US-Americans in recent political contexts.

When discussing the future directions of the religious right in the United States, it might be useful to examine closely the involvement of evangelicals with the Republican Party, especially considering that Bjork-James's research took place during the Trump era. She frequently mentions the substantial support by white evangelicals for Trump, even suggesting that his victory in the 2016 election would not have been possible without their backing. A more detailed investigation of the impact of the religious right onto the Trump presidency, but also vice versa of the Trump presidency on the religious right, seems pertinent, especially in the context of the next US election in late 2024.

In addition, I would like to address a specific terminology used in the book. The author occasionally uses the terms 'America' and 'Americans' when referring to the United States and its citizens (for example, pp. 27, 59, 60, 105, 139). This usage, which implicitly claims the name 'America' for the United States alone, is a product of US imperialism. Numerous South American artists and intellectuals have criticised this practice, with rapper Residente (365_days 2022) and conceptual artist Alfredo Jaar (Blitzer 2014), for example, integrating it into their art projects, highlighting the broader context of the American continent.

Regarding the stylistic elements of the book, I find it notable how the author utilises Colorado Springs as a symbolic representation to demonstrate how the traditional evangelical order is threatened by modernisation and a rapidly evolving society. The characterisation of Colorado Springs as the 'Evangelical Vatican' (p. 26) serves as an allegory to highlight the shifting dynamics within evangelical culture and the religious right over time. For instance, Bjork-James notes significant changes upon a follow-up visit to Colorado Springs in 2016. The presence of gluten-free restaurants, beer halls, and modern cafés where evangelical meeting spots had once stood exemplifies the encroachment of modernisation and secularisation, even within this evangelical stronghold. Conservatives who adhere to a traditional world order and a patriarchal social order rooted in hierarchy must witness the socio-economic changes of the globalised world even within their own neighbourhoods, no matter how hard they try to defend the traditional order – mostly through defending a traditional hierarchy in the family. For example, some pastors in Colorado Springs expressed concern about the increasing number of families in which both parents work to meet the economic demands of suburban living. They also note a growing division between the northern and southern

parts of the town. The north, home to megachurches and other evangelical institutions, epitomises the cultural and social boundaries established by white evangelicals to separate their self-described ‘Christian bubble’ (p. 41) from ‘outsiders’ (p. 57). This boundary-making strategy illustrates how white evangelicals attempt to maintain a certain status quo by differentiating themselves from perceived external threats. This phenomenon is increasingly becoming a focus of contemporary anthropological studies of Christianity (Robbins 2014; Coleman and Hackett 2015). The process of creating and maintaining boundaries is a recurrent theme in these studies, reflecting how evangelical communities navigate and respond to the challenges posed by a rapidly changing world.

In conclusion, *The Divine Institution* serves as a compelling demonstration of the central role of the politics of the family and its racialisation in the formation and lived expression of white evangelicalism. Examining this entanglement is increasingly urgent in contemporary times because of persistent racist structures and the rise of right-wing extremism in the Global North. As Bjork-James argues in her recent work, there is a pressing need to theorise race, particularly whiteness, within religious studies more rigorously and fearlessly, without shying away from discussions about power and racism (Schneider and Bjork-James 2020). Viewing family and sexual order as key elements of the religious right’s politics is not entirely novel within the discipline, since other scholars have dealt with these themes previously, as Bjork-James herself states. However, by employing an intersectional approach, Bjork-James adeptly uncovers the complex interplay of social factors such as race, gender, and economics in shaping evangelical family politics. Her work underscores the importance of examining both historical and contemporary influences on white evangelicalism, rendering her book an indispensable resource for scholars and readers interested in this field. What I find particularly enriching are the carefully chosen anecdotes of the author’s experiences in the field and the remarkably intimate narratives her interviewees recount about negotiating gender, sexuality, and family ideals. Bjork-James illustrates how family norms influence evangelical discourse on race, homosexuality, biblical interpretations, and conversion practices. In line with other researchers who have focused on the intimate dynamics within individual and small Bible study groups, Bjork-James asserts that an internal examination on the microsphere of evangelical family values is essential to grasping the larger context of white evangelicalism (for example, Bielo 2009).

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