

# Selling the Good News

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## *RDBook: Selling the Good News*

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### ***Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace***

Shayne Lee and Phillip Luke Sinitiere

(NYU Press, 2009)

### ***Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism***

Jonathan Walton

(NYU Press, 2009)

In a moment in which celebrity preachers are viewed either as charlatans or saints, two new books explore, in very different ways, how modern American evangelicalism is responding to a mass consumerist, globalized, post-civil rights-era culture.

The first, *Holy Mavericks: Evangelical Innovators and the Spiritual Marketplace* by Tulane University sociologist Shayne Lee and historian Phillip Luke Sinitiere, is a primer on five prominent evangelicals: Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes, Paula White, Brian McLaren, and Rick Warren.

By design, *Holy Mavericks* examines these figures through the prism of their marketing, whether through megachurch, television, or other media. Although McLaren, the emergent church leader, and Warren, the *Purpose Driven* mogul, do not use televangelism as the other three do, there's little question that marketing, particularly via the Web rather than the printing press—and via plane rather than donkey—have come to define their evangelism. McLaren's church has no building and no walls, but Warren's puts the *mega* in church. Everything is outsized; one of Jakes' successful festivals was called "MegaFest."

McLaren is a bit of the odd man out here, as a leading figure in the freewheeling, text-questioning emergent church movement, rather than the self-actualization/successful living theology that drives the ministries of the other four. All the ministries profiled here are "seeker-sensitive"—meaning that they aim to draw in new believers from skeptics, rather than preaching to the choir, a phenomenon that irks their critics. For the authors, this is what makes them attractive to bored, discontented, or disconsolate consumers—and therein lies their commercial success.

Many readers familiar with the Senate Finance Committee's investigation of White's alleged misuse of ministry funds for personal use, the controversy over President Barack Obama's selection of Warren to give the invocation at his inaugural ceremony, or who see Jakes and Osteen as power-of-positive-thinking con artists, are not the target audience for this book.

At the outset, Lee and Sinitiere explicitly dismiss critics of the religious right and of proof-texting-for-positive-living as missing the story behind why these evangelists are so wildly popular. "Analysts' grinding focus on narrow, destructive dimensions of evangelicalism may, ironically, unveil a limited understanding of the movement resulting in oversimplified confections that often obscure more than they reveal," they write in their introduction. Their aim, they contend, is to demonstrate how evangelicalism retains its vitality through the eyes of the "mavericks" followers.

As intriguing as the profiles are, in the end these mini-biographies are too one-sided. *Holy Mavericks* draws a bit on Lee's excellent first book, *T.D. Jakes: America's New Preacher*, which remains the essential account of Jakes' rise to stardom, but it could have used more of the same sort of reporting and analysis Lee did there. In framing each biography, Lee and Sinitiere rely too uncritically on each subject's autobiography rather than including, as Lee did in his book on Jakes, the views of contemporaries, colleagues, and critics. The reader is expected to accept, for example, that Paula White is a spokeswoman for exploding beauty myths while it is plain that she is obsessed with her own appearance, and has had plastic surgery. Or that inconsistencies between Jakes' lavish lifestyle and his denunciations of the prosperity gospel are nothing more than an evolution of his thinking, rather than yet another [repositioning](#) in the preacher's opportunistic marketing plan. Still, the profiles do tell us a lot about how the evangelists have successfully marketed their personal narratives and ideology to their consumers.

The second book, *Watch This: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* by University of California-Riverside religion professor (and Religion Dispatches contributing editor) Jonathan L. Walton, traverses some of the same territory as *Holy Mavericks*, zeroing in on the specific contribution to the evolution of African-American religion by Jakes, as well as megachurch televangelists Eddie Long and Creflo Dollar.

Walton's particular interest, which he plumbs with extraordinary historical, theological, and sociological insight, is what these paragons of three different strands of the contemporary black church mean for the present and future of African-American religion. His purpose is not strictly theological, although he explains quite well the three strands he categorizes as neo-Pentecostalism (Jakes), charismatic mainline (Long), and

Word of Faith (Dollar). While I have a few quibbles about where I understand these figures to be in a proverbial Venn diagram of contemporary televangelism (as there is some theological crossover, as Walton admits) his categories prove valuable for understanding how each preacher developed his own brand, and his own following.

*Watch This*' greatest virtue (and it has many) is Walton's exploration of how the theology and methodology of these televangelists fits with their historical antecedents in African American religion and evangelicalism, and what their ministries mean for the future spiritual, economic, and political lives of their adherents. He includes a fascinating history of black televangelism, particularly his interviews with early pioneer Rev. Frederick J. Eikerenkoetter II ("Rev. Ike"), who in a candid moment admits to Walton, "it's a wonder I didn't kill anybody" with his notorious faith healings.

Walton further situates his subjects' rise in the growth of the Word of Faith movement and its further development by Oral Roberts, who was a mentor to the 1980s phenomenon Carlton Pearson (who "discovered" Jakes, as Shayne Lee chronicled in his first book). Roberts also mentored Word of Faith powerhouse Kenneth Copeland, a benefactor to Dollar, who refers to himself as Copeland's "black son."

Walton devotes a chapter to each one of his subjects, and these, like in *Holy Mavericks*, are largely sympathetically-drawn portraits of how each man appeals to his admirers. Only later, in the strongest last two chapters, does Walton train his laser clarity on the problems with both these ministries' theology and methodology—or as he calls it, their aesthetics and ethics. Here, Walton lays bare some glaring shortfalls revolving around gender, race, injustice, and the divide between the "priestly" and the "prophetic."

Walton skillfully demonstrates how his subjects have benefitted from promoting the ideas that spiritual righteousness leads to prosperity, that blacks should avoid portraying themselves as victims of racism, and that God wants obedient, patriarchal churches and families: all formulations that can be traced to post-Reconstruction black churches. He argues that these myths undermine rather than lift up their followers, leading them to believe, for example, that being right with God can overcome the structural racial or economic inequality these preachers pretend does not exist. Particularly with regard to Jakes, who boasts the most [politically-connected, mainstream](#) reputation of the three, Walton shows how even though he doesn't promote the [complementarian](#) ideology that Long and Dollar do, he still "fetishizes" "hyper-femininity," and portrays women—who comprise some of his most devoted followers—as needing paternalistic protection.

In the end, all three come under the fire of Walton's pen for their failure to preach prophetically, and instead emphasizing their "priestly" role. "They do indeed inspire," he concedes in the closing pages he aptly titles Benediction. "But the price of inspiration is a lie... their fairy-tale understanding of American society is woefully inadequate for those who need more than simplistic homiletic formulations to confront the complexity of their existential circumstances."

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