

Response to Harris-Lacewell

Melissa Harris-Lacewell offers a timely and provocative discussion of black religion as an institution mediating between black Americans and Presidential politics. Her historical references provide a plush contextual backdrop for a parsimonious and revealing survey analysis. This is a very important matter, and I am grateful that Professor Harris-Lacewell is applying her skill to it. I think Harris-Lacewell is correct to assert that black religious ideas about prophetic leadership have some impact on black views of Presidents, and that it is undeniable that these religious ideas are themselves rooted in a unique history of oppression. I think she oversteps, nonetheless, to suggest that Presidential roles have been understood and evaluated solely through a prophetic hermeneutical lens, and that prophetic tradition implies prophetic expectations for the President. The analysis showing a relationship between strength of religiosity (itself a very fuzzy concept, the operationalization of which remains hotly contested in survey research circles) and adherence to the Democratic party is interesting in itself, but does not point to the hermeneutical frame she believes is responsible for the relationship. It would be impossible to prove the historic or contemporary influence of hermeneutics without considering more of the ways black religious people have regarded the Presidency and the role prophetic leadership.

Harris-Lacewell rightly acknowledges that black religiosity is not a monolithic field, but still asserts that Black people judge Presidents according to the latter's ability to fulfill the role of prophet for social justice. Black religious understandings and evaluations of political leadership are as widely diverse as black political thought in general. At no point in history, and certainly not presently, has all of black churchdom expected the President to fulfill a prophetic role in the social justice vein. Even those locatable within the prophetic tradition have not necessarily expected Presidents to be prophets.

Indeed, not all black religious ideologies have imagined the President as having the moral capacity to play such a role. During the Presidential contest between Landon and Roosevelt, the great Baptist leader and thinker Nannie Burroughs, along with a great many contemporaneous black Baptists, Methodists, and Pentecostals, proclaimed it utterly ridiculous that black people would expect a President, whether Republican or Democrat, to play any prophetic, messianic, or cosmic function on behalf of African Americans. Burroughs stood firmly in the prophetic tradition and was well ahead of much of the National Baptist Convention in her biting critique of power. Her prophetic leanings led her to dismiss any talk of a prophetic Presidency. Did many other black religious people attach prophetic charisma to Landon or Roosevelt? Of course. While Burroughs openly resisted black cooptation by political parties, L. K. Williams, then President of the National Baptist Convention, served as head of the Republican Party's Negro effort. This points to the fact that interpretations of the religio-racial significance of political leadership have always been deeply contested among clergy and laypeople alike, rather than taken for granted as a nearly hard-wired feature of black religion. In my view, the nature of the ongoing contestation is at least as interesting and important as its ever-shifting outcome.

In short, by reducing black religiosity to one slice of a particular eschatological and theodical vision, I think Harris-Lacewell paints black religious expectations of the Presidency with too wide a brush, and subsequently conflates the influence of black religion in general with the influence of what is perhaps its most famous hermeneutical trend.

Harris-Lacewell's assumption about the historic predominance (as opposed to the historic visibility) of certain prophetic/social justice hermeneutics leads her to take individualist strains of black religious thought as a recent development posing a new challenge for the churches in this era of highly polarized moral politics. I see contemporary black individualist religion as a recent incarnation of strains that have always been present in black religion, along with other forms of religious thought that did not perceive the President in prophetic or messianic terms. The contestation among these groups has practically always been alive, and has periodically become highly visible, especially at pivotal moments in formal national politics. This is a unique moment, to be sure, but it is, in many ways, not a new one.

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