Rev. William J. Barber's Moral Movement

A Radical Review of William J. Barber The Third Reconstruction (2016)

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> *"What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness [mercy], and to walk humbly with your God."* Micah (Quoted frequently by Rev. Barber)

The Reverend Dr. William J. Barber became nationally known in 2013 for his role in organizing massive demonstrations of African-American and white working class and poor people in North Carolina. *"Tens of thousands of people came for thirteen consecutive Moral Mondays"* to rally at the statehouse. "*By the end of the legislative session, nearly a thousand people had been arrested in the largest wave of mass civil disobedience since the lunch counter sit-ins of 1960.*" (x)

Now he is the co-chair of the effort to re-build Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign, with demonstrations at state capitals across the country. Thousands of people have been going to their statehouses to take part in the largest coordinated civil disobedience action across states in US history. This is an effort to mobilize a vast "fusion movement" of a wide range of working, poor, discriminated-against, oppressed, and exploited women and men, together with people concerned about war and ecological destruction.

This book was written after Rev. Barber had organized the Moral Monday movement and before he had begun to build the new Poor People's Campaign. It is an excellent introduction to his strategic and ethical thinking and to the faith which motivates him. The book covers parts of his family and personal history. That includes the physical ailment which has afflicted him for years but which did not stop his organizing efforts. However, I will focus on his overall thinking.

He calls for a "Third Reconstruction." The first Reconstruction followed the Civil War, and was a time of unprecedented opportunities for the ex-slaves. It was destroyed in a violent conservative backlash which established Jim Crow. The "Second Reconstruction" was the result of the Civil Rights movement of the 50s and 60s, which ended Southern legal segregation. Now Rev. Barber is calling for a "Third" Reconstruction which will finally end racism and other forms of oppression.

The Fusion Coalition

Two things stand out in what Rev. Barber is doing. One is the kind of "fusion coalition" which he is working to build. The other is the moral/religious basis on which he is building it.

Consistent with the prophet's instruction to "*walk humbly with your God*," he prefers to call himself an "organizer" rather than a "leader." From his first days organizing, he believed in a joint struggle of the African-American movement and of union organizing by workers (of all races and ethnicities), both supported by progressive forces in the church. "*Civil rights could not be separated from workers' rights….*" (48) "*Is the real issue today race or is it class? We answer: Yes, it's race and class.*" (128) But like his inspiration, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., he came to expand this conception while building a "fusion coalition" movement in North Carolina.

"*We had folks who cared about education, folks who cared about living wages, and others who were passionate about the 1.2 million North Carolinians who didn't have access to health care. We also had groups petitioning for redress for black and poor women who'd been forcibly sterilized in state institutions, organizations advocating for public financing in elections, and historically black colleges and universities petitioning for better state funding….Groups concerned about discrimination in hiring, others concerned about affordable housing, and people opposed to the death penalty and other glaring injustices in our criminal justice system. Finally, I noted the movements for environmental justice, immigrant justice, civil rights enforcement, and an end to America's 'war on terror'.*" (49)

Over time, people with these varying concerns pulled together. "*Moral Mondays…resulted from the efforts of 140 organizations that had worked together as a grassroots coalition for seven years.*" (xi) Through conferences and joint actions, the groups came to realize some things: "*We all recognized the same forces opposing us….[But] there were more of us than there were of them.*" (50)

At times, Rev. Barber had to finesse in order to be as inclusive as he wanted. For example, there was a state referendum on same-sex marriage, deliberately raised by the right to split the LGBTQ community from religious African-Americans. His movement took the position, "*it wasn't our job to endorse same-sex marriage….But the fundamental principle of equal protection under the law was a constitutional and moral principle which our movement had not only to endorse but also to defend….The codification of hate is never righteous. Legalized discrimination is never just.*" (91) This argument was persuasive in the Black community.

Another issue arose when discussing with Janet Cohn, the president of Planned Parenthood. "*I'd told her that with our broad coalition we could not endorse abortion, so she asked, 'Can you support women's rights and access to health care?' Absolutely, I told her.*" In turn, he asked if she would "*speak up for a black women's right to vote*?" (108) She was very willing to do so—and did. The coalition expanded.

However, this agreement seems unclear to me. The question of "abortion" should not be whether the movement calls for abortions, which it does not. It is whether to support women's right to chose whether or not to have abortions or other procedures. It is not over what opinion anyone (in or out of church) has about abortion. It is over whether anti-choice people should use the courts, the legislatures, and the police—the power of the state— to enforce their opinion on all women (which, among other things, violates the moral value of humility!).

How far this effort of coalition-building by Rev. Barber and his allies will go on a national level is yet to be seen. But it is a vitally important effort. In the time of Trump and the rising of the extreme right, this is a major effort at organizing a real resistance and fight-back by the oppressed, exploited, and endangered. That has been described as "intersectionality"—understanding the ways in which different oppressions interact and overlap with each other, and the fights against them interact and overlap. This sort of fusion coalition building is essential.

However, a coalition can be too broad. He writes, "*We needed to come together with banks and businesspeople….*" (38) Of a unionizing drive, he states, "*The factory owners could not simply be our enemy. the community needed them as much as they needed us.*" (17) But what if the rich are the enemy? What if they benefit from poverty, weak or no unions, super-exploitation of the workers, the extra oppression and poverty of People of Color, the divisions among whites and African-Americans and Latinos, and between straight and LGBTQ people, and among religions, and between genders? No doubt there are personally decent business people, but overall, as a class, it is in their interest to maintain all the evils which Rev. Barber and his coalition are fighting. And he says so:

"*The people most frightened by our fusion coalition were the elites who had inherited the spoils of white power and had run North Carolina by proxy for generations….What they had on their side, they knew, was money. [They are] shrewd businessmen….*" (62) In North Carolina, the coalition faced "*an avalanche of corporate funded extremism.*" (93)

It is one thing to have a nonviolent approach to racist white workers. It is really in their self-interest overall to work with African-American and Latino working people, and they can come to see it. But it is against the self-interest of the capitalists to join with their workers. It is a weakness of nonviolence as a philosophy that it does not see this (I am not speaking about

nonviolence as a tactic). Further, the view that "*the community needs*" businesspeople shows a lack of imagination, especially for someone who once discussed "*establishing worker-owned co-ops*." (5) Under present conditions workers have to live with their bosses, but it is possible to think of an alternate, radically democratic and cooperative, way to organize an economy (see Price 2014).

Writing about the English Civil War (of Cromwell and others), Lawrence Stone concluded that a necessary prerequisite to any revolution was "*polarization into two coherent groups or alliances of what are naturally and normally a series of fractional and shifting tensions and conflicts within a society.*" (quoted in Foner 1980; 31). While not advocating a revolution, Rev. Barber is working at building a "coherent group or alliance" out of conflicted and fractionalized social forces. This is a deliberate effort, as stated in the book's subtitle, to "*overcome the politics of division and fear.*" But people need to recognize that a "coherent alliance" of the people will necessarily be counterposed to another "coherent group" of the rich and powerful.

The Moral Movement

Central to Rev. Barber's approach is a fundamentally moral appeal. In the words of the prophet Micah, which Barber likes to quote, the aim is *"to do justice [and] to love kindness*" (often written as "*mercy*"). His views are rooted in the African-American prophetic tradition. Theologically, he presents himself as a Christian "conservative." He jokes that his politically conservative opponents are theologically "liberal," in the sense that they ignore or twist the large parts of the Christian Bible which speaks of doing justice and loving kindness, of helping the poor, of supporting the least among us, of rejecting riches and power, of being humble, and so on. Nor does he limit himself to Christianity. He specifically rejects the view that the Christian church should be the only champion of ethical values in society. He includes all religions, making a point of including Muslims. "*My Holy Bible is not the only holy book." (105)*

The Rev. Barber rejects what he takes to be "*the liberal consensus that suggests that faith is either divisive or inherently regressive.*" Instead he advocates "*a faith-rooted moral movement that welcomes people of all faiths, as well as those who struggle with faith.* (66) As a radical humanist, I too reject liberal condescension towards religious views or the belief that religion is "*inherently regressive*." I respect all faiths. While some have used religion to justify the worst of oppressions (as Rev. Barber knows), religious faith has motivated great struggles for freedom and justice.

However I find his last phrase somewhat condescending toward atheists, agnostics, secularists, humanists, etc., as well as similar references to"*people of no particular faith.*" (38) I do not feel that I am "*struggling with faith*" or have "*no particular faith,*" since I have particular views of my own. In general, I have not found that non-theistic people are any less moral or ethically motivated than are believers in particular religions. (See Price 2009.)

Rev. Barber describes how he came to understand the importance of an directly moral approach when supporting a union-organizing drive at a North Carolina Smithfield hog-processing factory. "*In the media as well as in the community, the story was simply one of workers' interests versus business interests.*" (69) It was difficult to develop community support. So they decided "*to change the narrative by making the workers' struggle a moral cause for our whole coalition.*" (69) They exposed the hard work, the suffering, and the mistreatment of the workers and their families.

"*The public story was no longer one about workers versus bosses. It was about the moral challenge of people receiving the just fruit of the labor.*" (70)

It is completely correct to point to the moral basis of a struggle, of the need to do the right thing, to do justice and love kindness in all our activities. However, as expressed, this can lead to a certain kind of blindness. **Morality (justice and kindness) should not be counterposed to the self-interest of the oppressed.** The issue of the Smithfield workers' moral cause only became clear because they were struggling for their self-interest against that of the bosses. It is far easier for workers to see the justice of "receiving the just fruit of their labor" than it is for the bosses, whose financial self-interest lay in **not** seeing it. And it is easier for the community—and the members of the coalition—to see that justice if they realize that the struggle is in all their interests—because "*We all recognized the same forces opposing us.*" (50)

Elections and the Democratic Party

Most U.S. left and "progressive" forces have a strategy of electing Democrats to replace the Republicans, especially Donald Trump. (I am not talking about how isolated individuals vote every few years, but about the strategy of a movement.) The "Resistance" to Trumpism has become primarily a support for the Democratic Party. This party represents a liberal-to-moderate wing of the U.S. capitalist class. It supports capitalism, the attack on U.S. working people, the imperialist national state, and military aggression around the world. In words Democrats recognize the looming danger of global warming, but in practice they propose only mild and inadequate programs. As the failures of the Republicans has driven people to support the Democrats, so the repeated failures of the Democrats has driven people to support the Republicans. This includes the poverty, economic stagnation, low wages, and industrial decline of much of the country. Over decades, liberals, union officials, African-American community leaders, and other "progressives" have supported the Democrats as a "lesser evil." The Republicans have consistently become more and more evil while the Democrats have become less and less good—that is, both parties have moved to their right. A minority of liberals have come to advocate a new, third, party as a strategy. This still relies on elections and the use of the government.

This is not Rev. Barber's strategy. He notes that his coalition-building began "*when Democrats were in power*" in North Carolina. (52) The biased drawing of voting districts is something "*which Democrats had engaged in as much as Republicans in the past.*" (83) "*No one was listening to poor people. Republicans and Democrats alike….*" (88) He has worked for popular demonstrations and civil disobedience, rather than voting. Criticized for "*not running…candidates who would champion our agenda.* [He replied]*…we will not win by starting a third party. We will win by changing the conversation for every candidate and party.*" (124) He wants to raise "*a clear agenda that doesn't measure success only by electoral outcomes.*" (129) He has opposed any effort to tie the coalition to political candidates or parties. He reports winning over working class and rural white people who had supported Republicans in the past, but were impressed that the movement was not a front for Democrats.

Yet his approach is not all that far from the liberal pro-Democratic strategy. He and his coworkers focus on statehouses and electoral laws. They protest the unfairness of the Republicans' gerrymandering of electoral districts and their voter suppression efforts. These things are worth protesting because they are unfair and repressive. But even the purest, cleanest, representative

democracy would still be dominated by the corporate elite. And even the best democracy would still be vulnerable to forces outside of elections as such.

For example, after the Civil War, the Reconstruction era had a wide range of African-Americans elected to state offices, he writes. "*More blacks were elected to public office during the period from 1868 to 1880 than at any other time in American history.…African-Americans wielded significant power in every statehouse.*" (56) There was a coalition between African-Americans and many white Southerners. But all this electoral power came to nothing. The Southern white upper class, former slave owners and businesspeople, mobilized racism among the poorer whites. They armed these people, built up the Klan, instigated "race riots," murdered and lynched Black leaders, used "*violence, intimidation, and the passage of laws that, together came to be called Jim Crow.*"(116) They took away the right to vote and all other rights, by legal and illegal measures. The national government, led by Republicans, did nothing in the defense of democracy.

Could this happen again? Consider the history of fascist coups in democratic European countries in the 20s and 30s or in the military coup in democratic Chile in 1973. To a lesser extent, even now, we have seen an African-American president be followed by a reactionary, racist, authoritarian president (who lost the popular vote), who has encouraged fascists, who has blatantly served the wealthy, and whose party has worked to suppress the votes of African-Americans and others.

It is dangerous to rely on elections and government power. The government is an instrument of the corporate rich and their agents and cannot be anything else. A mass movement has to built outside of and against the government and its big business masters. Even reforms are most likely to be won if there is a militant and independent mass movement. Lyndon Johnson's "*support for the Voting Rights Act was in direct response to the coordinated organizing of Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SNCC, and local leaders in Selma, Alabama.*" (119)

Along with every other issue, there needs to be a focus on workers and their unions. This is not because they are the most deserving but because they have an enormous potential power. If the working people decided not to work for even a day, the whole system would grind to a halt. And they could potentially start things up in a different, democratic and cooperative, way. This would truly be a moral transformation of society.

Revolutionary Conclusions

Rev. Barber is aware that the racist capitalist system is facing a severe crisis. He quotes the radical economist Gar Alperowitz, "*What we're really beginning to experience is a process of slow decay, punctuated by a recurring economic crisis, one in which reforms achieve only sporadic gains.*" (85) Barber adds, "*Though we ended Jim Crow segregation in the 1960s…the wealth divide that is rooted in our history of race-based slavery is more extreme than it has ever been.*" (xii-xiii) He warns that "*Anything less [than a Third Reconstruction], I fear, will mean the self-destruction of our nation.*" (xv)

The implication of these statements is that the struggle for reforms can only go so far. Limited gains may be won, and have been won, but they are harder and harder to achieve. "*Only sporadic gains*" are the order of the day. This poses questions for any popular movement of opposition, such as the Poor People's Campaign.

It is necessary to build a fusion coalition to fight for reforms, but this is not enough. What is needed is a moral vision of a new kind of society, based on justice and kindness, freedom and equality, radical democracy and cooperation, in all their political, social, and economic aspects. The wealth and power of the capitalist class must be taken from it. Ordinary people—the working class and all oppressed—must be empowered. The Third Reconstruction needs to be a new American Revolution.

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