

Adam L. Bond. *The Imposing Preacher: Samuel DeWitt Proctor and Black Public Faith*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013. 247 pages. \$26.10.

Religion news editor George Dugan's *New York Times* feature article "An Imposing Preacher: Samuel DeWitt Proctor" headlined on July 24, 1972, the day after interim pastor of Harlem's historic Abyssinian Baptist Church enthusiastically voiced, "Stand and meet your pastor!" Historian Adam L. Bond's magisterial theo-biography, penned just four decades following Proctor's appointment as successor to Abyssinian's famed clerico-politician Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., represents the most comprehensive treatment of the intellectual and clerical legacy of one of America's most influential Black public theologians of the mid-to-late twentieth century. In this work, Bond describes Proctor as a bridge figure, pragmatic religious harmonizer, and theological barometer for the Black Christian community, whose deft rescue of a vanishing Black social gospel tradition forged a crucial middle ground between a Black Theology revolution that rocketed in the late 60s and 70s and the well-ensconced tradition of American Protestant fundamentalism (3, 70).

Bond places Proctor in his historical context as a sagely black Baptist pastor's pastor, whose Black middle-class upbringing, theological embrace of 20<sup>th</sup> century liberalism and Personalism, U.S. presidential appointments, international travel, and work as college president, professor, and pastor uniquely equipped him for civic and religious engagement in the public square. With such legendary preachers as Gardner Taylor, Martin King, and Howard Thurman being an important exception, Proctor's mentoring influence on some of the nation's most prominent African American preachers is without parallel. Bond helpfully notes that Proctor's biography "is eerily similar to that of Martin Luther King, Jr.," since both men hailed from the deep South, acquired their seminary and doctoral degrees in Boston, preached a social gospel centered on the ethics of Jesus, fought for racial de-segregation and racial integration, and through moral suasion sought to reform America's political system. Nonetheless, this work is a valiant attempt that points out the distinctive paths of the two men. For example, King was "a marching activist" whose career was cut short; Proctor's career spanned four decades, and unlike King he nurtured his voice as public theologian primarily within the strictures of the academy (4).

*The Imposing Preacher* is organized into six chapters, each followed by a compendium of source notes, which provides the reader relative ease in tracking the author's citations. In Chapter One Bond presents Proctor as a theological genius who skillfully linked together or divorced himself from several Black public faith options. Bond labels him a Black Social "American" Gospel theologian. Here Bond examines at length diverse traditions of Black public faith describing their tenets and leading proponents. Analyzed are James Cone and J. Deotis Roberts' Black liberation projects, Katie Canon's womanist program, E. V. Hill's biblical literalism platform and association with the Religious Right, and Jesse Jackson's (a mentee of Proctor) Rainbow Theology political evangelism model. Chapters Two and Three survey Proctor's historical and cultural roots, specifically, the ideals that encouraged and shaped his public ministry. Chapter Four, titled "Everybody is God's Somebody"—one of Proctor's familiar adages—synthesizes the social construction of Proctor's theology, faith commitments, and concern for society's "least of these." In this chapter, Bond also describes the nature of Proctor's allegiance to Baptist faith, debts to White liberal preachers, especially Harry Emerson Fosdick, and mentoring influences of African American religious intellectuals such as J. Pius Barbour and John Malcus Ellison.

As a self-described “race man,” according to Bond, Proctor’s response to racism classifies him as a member of Cornel West’s “Humanist Tradition,” which takes the tack that African Americans have “just as many positive and negative qualities as any other racial group.” Opposite exceptionalist, assimilationists, and marginalists, subscribers of this tradition “see in electoral politics the opportunity for social change” (142). Chapter Five holds particular interest for readers who seek a deep exposure into the preaching life of Samuel Proctor. In this segment, Bond exercises his chops as a homiletical historian. After carefully distilling the distinguishing features of two African American preaching traditions—folk/revival preaching and college chapel/lecture preaching, Bond presents the nuts and bolts of Proctor’s sermon preparation method—an approach based on German philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel’s dialectic method.

Finally, in Chapter Six Bond discusses why Proctor’s Christian vision has relevance today for constructing a vision for “genuine community” —one that affirms the ideals of personhood, freedom, as well as educational, racial and socioeconomic justice. Few proposals since the release of Henry Mitchell’s *Black Preaching* in 1970, or ones appearing as late as Cleo LaRue’s *Heart of Black Preaching* in 2000, have furthered the discussion of Black preaching and Black public faith beyond carving out Black preaching’s nomenclature as has Bond’s research. Fewer still have examined African American preaching beyond contrasting it with Eurocentric preaching traditions. Bond’s book, a much needed resource, offers readers an invaluable look into the window of the complex identity and life world of the Black intellectual preacher—a window made opaque due to the oft unsuccessful task of rescuing the Black preacher from dreadful caricature.

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