

Review: JAR1403

**THE BIBLE MADE ME DO IT:
Does Christianity Cause Crime?**

a book review of

The Devil You Know:

The Surprising Link between Conservative Christianity and Crime

by Elicka Peterson Sparks

(Prometheus Books, 2016)

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A friend of mine recently shared an Internet meme with me that said, “God, Guns, and Guts made America. Let’s keep all three.” Soon after, I saw a bumper sticker with essentially the same message. It is this brand of Christianity that is the stated focus of Elicka Peterson Sparks in her new book, *The Devil You Know: The Surprising Link between Conservative Christianity and Crime*.

There is empirical evidence that religious belief and practice has a positive impact by producing what social scientists call “prosocial behavior.” Religion is thought to reinforce altruism, provide exemplars, and provide support for society’s moral standards. However, there is also evidence for the claim that religious fundamentalists do not act in such ways toward those who they perceive as members of an outgroup.¹ In her book, Peterson Sparks contends that there is a strong connection between certain forms of conservative Christianity in the United States and criminal behavior.

Christian Nationalism. Peterson Sparks's main thesis is that "a distinctively American brand of conservative Christian ideology called Christian nationalism has both a direct and indirect impact on the crime problem in the United States" (p. 14). Her focus, then, is *Christian nationalism*, which Peterson Sparks describes as including several core beliefs: (1) the Bible is the literal and authoritative Word of God; (2) the Bible should be the only foundation for all of American life; (3) the United States must be returned to its status as Christian nation; (4) conservative Christians are superior and have a right to rule over America; and (5) Christians must keep our nation from its continuing slide into the corruption wrought by secular humanism (15). She contends that Christian nationalism (and the culture surrounding it) has a direct impact on crime insofar as it contributes to violent criminal activities against women, children, members of the LGBTQ community, people who are members of other religious faiths, and nonbelievers. Indirectly, Christian nationalism supports positions in the realm of criminal justice that foster criminal behavior, such as the war on drugs and a variety of "get tough on crime" policies, both of which have led to a stark increase in the rates of incarceration, which in turn yields higher crime rates.

There are commendable points raised in this book. In the era of Trumpism, many Christians are considering anew what the proper relationship is not only between church and state but also between their faith and their citizenship. It seems plausible to me that if someone believes that they know what God wants, are part of what was originally a Christian nation, are superior to others, and that they possess a God-given right to rule over America, then they may be disposed to certain kinds of criminal acts.

Humility. I have no desire to defend Christian nationalism. I think the view is morally reprehensible and theologically untenable. The notion that conservative Christians are superior and have a right to rule over America because Genesis 1:28 gives them dominion over all of the Earth is morally and theologically flawed. Followers of Christ are not to view themselves as superior to anyone, inside or outside of the church. First, the attitude and example of Jesus Himself, as described by Paul in Philippians 2:5–11, should undercut any attitude of superiority. The incarnate Son of God took the role of a servant and died a humiliating death on our behalf. Moreover, in 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul says, "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst" (NIV). There are different ways of taking this statement, but any sound interpretation of Paul here would seem to rule out an attitude of superiority on the part of any follower of Jesus.

I am not a social scientist, and so I find it difficult to examine and evaluate the studies that Peterson Sparks refers to in this book. However, she points out that there is no criminological research on the specific relationship between Christian nationalism and violent crime. She attempts to defend her particular theory that "fundamentalist Christian ideology is criminogenic"² — it causes crime. This is an example of a problem that is present throughout the book. The target of her criticism seems to vacillate. Her initial stated target is Christian nationalism, which is a very specific ideology with the components enumerated above. At other times, the target is more general: either

fundamentalist Christianity or conservative Christianity. I find her case for the potential links between Christian nationalism and crime more persuasive than the purported links between a more general fundamentalist or conservative Christianity and crime.

Define Your Terms. The reason I'm skeptical about these other links is that many whom Peterson Sparks would likely see as "fundamentalist" or "conservative" Christians simply do not hold to the tenets of Christian nationalism that seem more prone to produce criminal acts. It would be helpful to know what she thinks are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a Christian nationalist, or at least for what counts as a form of conservative Christianity that is criminogenic. Does Christian nationalism require all the elements listed above or merely some of them? She says not all are required. But if all are not necessary, which ones are?

This matters deeply, because many Christians hold some of these views and abhor violence, reject dominionist theology, and do not think that America is a Christian nation in the sense described by Peterson Sparks. I've been a part of several evangelical churches over the years, all of which held a high view of Scripture but none of which were dominionist, nor did the pastor or other leaders in these churches teach that Christians were superior to others. Quite the opposite, in fact. We were encouraged to follow in the steps of humility exemplified by Christ.

Another major weakness of this book is the shallow treatment of Scripture. For instance, she exhibits a misunderstanding of the nature of the atonement, of the character of a morally perfect God, and what authentic Christian faith requires (e.g., it is not mere fire insurance that gives one a license to sin). Consider three specific examples of her flawed interpretations of the Bible.

Lawbreakers. First, she discusses 1 John 3:4, which states, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness" (NIV). She interprets this as equating sin with breaking the *criminal* law of the state, which she claims in turn justifies Christian nationalist beliefs about harsher criminal punishments and a lack of empathy for those who break the law. Of course, the problem here is that the law being referred to here is not the law of the state but the law of God. I don't know if Christian nationalists interpret this verse in the way that Peterson Sparks does, but if they do, they are mistaken, and her critique of them is on point. However, the critique would be invalid if raised against the Bible or others who are theologically conservative but reject this misinterpretation of 1 John.

Violence and Virtue? At times, her description of what the Bible teaches simply is inaccurate. For example, she states that there are many situations in which God approves of violent behavior as a punishment, including being disobedient to parents and wearing a cotton/polyester blend of clothing. While there are stated punishments for disobeying parents in the Old Testament, there is no punishment associated with the prohibition against wearing clothing that is made of two kinds of material in Leviticus 19. There are, of course, many questions and difficulties surrounding Old Testament

teachings (which in any case typically do not apply directly to New Testament believers), and I do not want to minimize these. But it is important to be clear on what it actually teaches, and in at least some cases, Peterson Sparks falls short.³

Anti-Intellectualism. Third, Peterson Sparks contends that the more one knows about Christianity, the less likely it is that one will remain a Christian. This has not been my experience, nor the experience of many I know who seek to love God with their minds. There is anti-intellectualism in the church, but her claim here is an overgeneralization. She goes on to claim that the Bible “explicitly warns against an attitude of open inquiry” (78). Her only biblical support for this is the claim that those who engage in it risk damnation because they are blaspheming the Holy Spirit. First, I know of no credible scholar who thinks that blaspheming the Spirit involves some sort of open inquiry about the Christian faith. And second, there simply is no place in the Bible where an attitude of open inquiry is prohibited. The Christian tradition is intellectually rich in part because of the Bible, not despite it.

Contrary to what she claims, we cannot make the Bible say whatever we want it to say. That is simply false. A simplistic approach to interpreting Scripture should be avoided, both by Christians and their critics. The principle of charity demands this. Peterson Sparks has not set up a straw man, however, as there are Christian nationalists who would use these passages to justify their criminal and immoral behavior. This is a problem for their view, yet not for others who are theologically conservative but eschew Christian nationalism as a perversion of “the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints” (Jude 1:3 NASB).

Christians who seek to be citizens who support the common good and foster God’s kingdom should be concerned about Christian nationalism for many reasons, including those discussed in *The Devil You Know*. For her work in underscoring some of these concerns, and her charge to her colleagues to undertake research on the connections between Christian nationalism and violent crime, we can be grateful to Peterson Sparks. — *Michael W. Austin*

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NOTES

1. For an overview and a discussion of this, see Vassilis Saroglou et al., “Prosocial Behavior and Religion: New Evidence Based on Projective Measures and Peer Ratings,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44, 3 (2005): 323–48.
2. *Ibid.*, 14.
3. For helpful discussions of these issues, see Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Baker Books, 2011); and Paul Copan and Matt Flannagan, *Did God Really Command Genocide? Coming to Terms with the Justice of God* (Baker Books, 2014).