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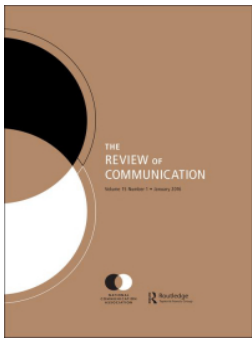
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## Prophetic dissent in dark times: the new Poor People's Campaign and the rhetoric of national redemption

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, we offer an analysis of an important social movement challenging the fantasy of Christian nationalism: the new Poor People's Campaign, and specifically the rhetoric of the Bishop Dr. William J. Barber II. We argue that Barber's rhetoric represents a source of dissent against Christian nationalism through his strategic use of the jeremiad. Barber's progressive jeremiad offers a distinctively moral narrative that recovers the radical Christian legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Ultimately, we argue that Barber's jeremiad advances a distinctive narrative of American national redemption through democratic renewal and reconstruction.

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An enduring rhetorical legacy of the Trump years will undoubtedly be the ideological potency of Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism is a dangerous symbolic thread that connects Trumpism, QAnon, and white nationalist terrorist organizations such as the Proud Boys and Oath Keepers. Christian nationalism informed Trump's most loyal political supporters, Evangelical Christians, and was on full display during the violent insurrection of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. The insurrectionists donned Christian flags, crosses on T-shirts, "Jesus Saves" signs, and prayers for victory in Jesus' name in the Capitol. What rhetorical strategies exist to dissent against such a fatalistic and antidemocratic narrative of American national redemption?

In this paper, we advance an examination of the new Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for Moral Revival, and specifically the oratory of Bishop Dr. William J. Barber II, as a case study of dissent. We argue that Barber's rhetoric represents a vital source of prophetic dissent against Christian nationalism through his strategic use of the jeremiad. Barber's progressive jeremiad offers a distinctively moral narrative that recovers the radical Christian legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Ultimately, we argue that Barber's jeremiad advances a distinctive narrative of American national redemption through democratic renewal and reconstruction.

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## Prophetic dissent

Scholars of communication have long recognized the importance of dissent to the sustenance of a democratic culture. In the most basic sense of the term, to dissent is to disagree, and without it a healthy democracy cannot flourish. “Dissent,” as Robert L. Ivie observes, “is the balancing point between stability and change, cleavage and consensus, politics and revolution, life and decay.”<sup>1</sup> It is the creative force that enables both critique and civil cooperation; like a lubricant, it yokes each of a political order’s social factions into a contiguous totality of disagreement and concurrence. Dissent is the epitome of loyal opposition, for it involves “advancing a significant difference of opinion or expressing a substantial disagreement without making a complete break with the prevailing viewpoint.”<sup>2</sup> “By enriching the social imaginary,” note Jeffrey St. Onge and Jennifer Moore, “dissenting voices can challenge norms that constrict political culture in negative ways, and they can offer new ways to think about stagnant and well-worn conventional wisdoms that limit democracy’s potential.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, democracies depend on dissent to disrupt social maladies constitutive of the human condition, including cultural conformity and tendencies to dehumanize others and simplify complex issues on matters of public judgment. Dissent thus serves as a remedy to political repression and a bulwark against demagoguery.

For the past two decades, Rhetorical Studies has documented the dynamic forms dissent can take across a variety of rhetorical situations and contexts. Aside from his significant contributions to theorizing the role of dissent in democratic societies, Ivie has long documented how citizens strategically discover and enact practices of dissent against the imperial excesses and war culture of American militarism.<sup>4</sup> St. Onge and Moore, as well as Dale M. Smith, have each examined how the aesthetics of poetry can serve as a rhetorical vehicle of dissent.<sup>5</sup> Stephen J. Hartnett, moreover, has documented how the cultural fictions of race and nationhood facilitated and complicated democratic dissent during the antebellum period on matters of slavery, manifest destiny, and American empire.<sup>6</sup> Finally, Dana L. Cloud has explored the role of unions as a source of dissent and organized opposition to the managerial and shareholder class of American corporate capitalism.<sup>7</sup> Each of these studies documents the civic pursuit of rhetorical resources capable of inviting novel perspectives on stale and settled ideas within mainstream culture, an art of praxis that stretches the boundaries of new political possibilities and social freedom.

We seek to contribute to this burgeoning scholarship through an analysis of the new Poor People’s Campaign, which to this point has been overlooked by Rhetorical Studies. Situated at the intersection of race, religion, and the struggle against illiberal populism, The Poor People’s Campaign offers a compelling example of prophetic dissent. Prophecy is mostly absent from contemporary conversations in rhetorical theory. “Prophecy” is not easily defined and is not summarily reduced to the books of the Bible, for it is a social practice of many cultures. Some scholars, such as Michael Walzer, have defined prophecy in secular terms as a form of social criticism authorized not by law, reason, or revelation, but by the “core values” of a social community.<sup>8</sup> As George Shulman observes, prophecy “names the public role of those who address a community by mediating its relationship to the larger realities conditioning its existence and choices.”<sup>9</sup> “Prophecy” also, of course, names a literary and political genre of embodied symbolic action that includes a repertoire of cadences of speech and affect, as well as narrative forms and tropes, that speakers and participants performatively evoke to address fundamental political questions of value.<sup>10</sup>

Within the Judea-Christian tradition, as James Darsey, Andre E. Johnson, and others note, prophecy is an office of messengers who announce unpopular and uncomfortable truths as they address their community.<sup>11</sup> However, as a social practice, prophecy is often the subject of intense conflict, for participants in the enterprise will argue over whose words should be recognized as authoritative. The books of the Bible are replete with passages cautioning readers to recognize and differentiate the presence of “false” prophets from authentic prophets. To be sure, Christian nationalists address their American audience within the performative style and *topoi* of prophecy. For these reasons, a comparison between the speech of Christian nationalists and their prophetic rivals illustrates an important site of discursive conflict within an American rhetorical landscape marked by social fragmentation, polarization, and banal threats of political violence.

For our purposes, we focus on the progressive tradition of prophecy, which has been integral to the struggle for social and political equality in the United States. Cornel West, who has long chronicled this tradition, argues that its central moral and theoretical principle holds that “the condition of truth is to allow suffering to speak.”<sup>12</sup> Prophetic dissent in this tradition involves calling attention to “the causes unjustified suffering and unnecessary social misery” with the goal of “stir[ring] up in us the courage to care and empower us to change our lives and our historical circumstances.”<sup>13</sup>

The new Poor People’s Campaign offers a compelling model for how a progressive prophetic rhetoric can be actualized as a symbolic form. One of the most powerful narrative forms of the prophetic genre is the jeremiad. In our next section, we shall first outline the history and primary rhetorical characteristics of the jeremiad before offering comparative rhetorical analysis of Christian nationalism and the Poor People’s Campaign. Ultimately, we seek to demonstrate how Bishop Dr. William J. Barber II marshals this mode of address toward a progressive prophetic dissent against the Christian nationalist narrative of redemption.

## The American jeremiad

For centuries, the jeremiad has offered orators an established rhetorical form for expressing indignation that serves as a corrective to conditions gone awry. Amid a “falling away,” the jeremiad advances a call to the community to return to its idealized foundational principles. The narrative form “jeremiad” is named for the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah, who lamented Israel’s wickedness and warned of its destruction for its failure to maintain the Mosaic covenant with God. Although he foresaw Israel’s tribulation, he also imagined the nation’s atonement and restoration for a future age of prosperity. As a staple of the Judea-Christian rhetorical canon, the jeremiad came to be Americanized among 17th-century New England Puritans as an articulation of their self-identity as a chosen people. They believed that they had been chosen by providence to escape a hopelessly corrupt European religious and social establishment, and found a new holy society in America.

The jeremiad consists of three rhetorical characteristics in American literature and public address: first, to name the covenant (that is, to identify a special people as “chosen” to carry out a millennial task or mission); second, to make public lamentation for a decline (that is, to establish how the community is a falling away from the promise bestowed in the covenant); and third, to imagine redemption (that is, to connect the past to the future in a way that redeems the promise of the covenant).<sup>14</sup> Through deeply resonant tropes of founding ideals and corruption, of covenant renewal and collective

redemption, the jeremiad narrates community decline in terms of its constitutive commitments and current difficulties, thus making its future contingent on a decision about its social conduct. This powerful genre offers would-be prophets a rhetorical form to identify the fateful choices that form, endanger, and redeem their community.

While the Puritans introduced the jeremiad to America, it soon became adapted beyond their original use. A distinctively Black tradition of the jeremiad took root during the 19th and 20th centuries that critics and social movements leveraged to dissent against slavery and later forms of systemic inequities. David Howard-Pitney has outlined how the American jeremiad came to be used by Abolitionists and Civil Rights era activists for the purposes of Black protest.<sup>15</sup> If apologists for slavery and segregationists sought to use the jeremiad to preserve the American social order to their liking, the Black jeremiad offered social reformers a powerful discursive tool for dissent.

For our purposes, the skillful use of the jeremiad for progressive political projects is of immense importance, since it is capable of affectively compelling a people to imagine the constitutive power of the past in a way that forces them to decide how to come to terms with it as a condition of its agency to address fundamental questions of the political. There is no doubt a risk that comes with prophetic rhetoric and its jeremiad. As Shulman notes, “in its jeremiad modality, prophecy risks idealization of the past, moralizing a ‘corrupt’ present as a decline from pure origins to which people could return,” since prophets narrate infidelity to principle.<sup>16</sup> But the challenge and opportunity presented by the jeremiad are that of naming the founding principle underlying the covenant to which we must return, and there are many historical examples worth emulating for our current moment of democratic crisis in the United States.

Frederick Douglas, Malcom X, and Martin Luther King each identified America’s founding violence as an origin that haunts the present, but their Black jeremiads “returned” to equality as a first principle and to revolution itself, not to repeat the past but to (re)found the American democratic republic in a struggle against slavery and later Jim Crow racial discrimination. They transformed how we judge the meaning of American history as a narrative strategy for rearticulating American self-identity and redrawing the democratic boundaries of cultural citizenship and of the political itself. For them, the past is a resource whose promise we can still redeem. In our own time, the Bishop Dr. William J. Barber II offers a contemporary example of the jeremiad in this tradition, but to understand how his use of the jeremiad dissents against Christian nationalists, we must first outline how they articulate American national redemption on their own terms.

## Christian nationalism

In *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*, Andrew Whitehead and Samuel Perry define Christian nationalism as a collection of narratives, traditions, myths, values, and symbols that fuses American identity with a narrow and ultraconservative strain of Christianity. Since at least the early 19th century, Christian nationalism has offered a metanarrative of American national identity that has been historically “deployed to preserve the interests of those who wish to halt or turn back changes occurring within American society.”<sup>17</sup> Christian nationalism seeks to erect a rigid social order that institutionalizes cultural prescriptions and preferences for American public policy and national self-identity in its image. It glorifies a fantasy of America

marked by the dominance of patriarchal, heterosexual, and cisgender gender roles in combination with racial, nativistic, and ethnocentric boundaries for legal citizenship and cultural belonging. As Whitehead and Perry observe, “Americans who embrace Christian nationalism are much more likely to create, support, and maintain symbolic and social boundaries that exclude non-Christians from full inclusion into American civic life,” which “forces non-Christians to continually defend their right to exist and advocate for their right to participate in the public sphere.”<sup>18</sup>

Robert Jeffress, a Southern Baptist pastor at First Baptist Church in Dallas and a Fox News Contributor, offers an illustrative example of the rhetoric of Christian nationalism. Jeffress, who served as a member of Trump’s evangelical advisory board, has long been a proponent of Christian nationalism. In his 2020 sermon “America is a Christian Nation,” he advances a Christian nationalist rendition of the jeremiad.

### **The covenant**

The first step in any jeremiad begins with the orator’s naming of a chosen people and their covenant with God. Jeffress begins his sermon by naming the 18th-century American colonists as a chosen people. Citing historical documents and passages from the “Founding Fathers” and no Bible verses, Jeffress posits that the Constitutional Convention and its participants forged a covenant with God that took the form of the U.S. constitution, stating:

[T]he truth is, America was founded primarily, not exclusively, but primarily by orthodox Christians. And they founded this country upon the unchanging foundation of God’s eternal truth. And furthermore, our founders believed that our success as a nation depended upon our faithfulness to God’s eternal word. And though it is completely politically incorrect to say, this truth is this: America was founded as a Christian nation. And our success as a nation depends upon our fidelity to God’s word.<sup>19</sup>

For Jeffress, America was originally founded as a Christian ethno-state that made no separation between the state and the Christian church. America’s millennialist mission and purpose in history depends on its commitment to this covenant in which the orthodox hermeneutics of the church directs the policies of the state.

### **Falling away**

If American Christians who adhere to orthodox teachings are a chosen people, Jeffress identifies the wall of separation between church and state for his lamentation against the decline of America’s fidelity to God. Citing seminal Supreme Court rulings such as *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) and *Stone v. Graham* (1980), which prohibited Bible reading and the Ten Commandments in public schools, he accuses organizations such as the ACLU, Freedom from Religion Foundation, and liberal Supreme Court justices, such as Hugo Black, of secularizing American culture and thus undermining America’s covenant with God. As he puts it:

What has happened in the last 60 or 70 years? Has the constitution changed, and somebody didn’t tell us? No. What happened is this: We’ve allowed the atheists, the secularists, the infidels to pervert our constitution into something our founders never intended. And we

cannot allow that to happen any longer. It is time for us to stand up and say without apology that America was founded as a Christian nation.<sup>20</sup>

Secularization, according to Jeffress, led to a departure from America's founding orthodox Christian ideals and has resulted in a decaying society marked by sexual depravity, abortion, gun violence, homicide, and single-parent households.

Jeffress' remarks illustrate how Christian nationalists rely on a binary distinction of us/them that helps them imagine themselves as victims of a political tragedy centered around the displacement of "real Christians," and thus "real Americans," from the political center by secularists, atheists, and "infidels". His claims about the "perversion of *our* constitution" aligns with what Jonathan Edwards, Anthea Butler, Casey Ryan Kelly, and other critical scholars of American conservatism and the Religious Right have documented, that Christian nationalists ascribe moral worth to an "us" (white, natural-born, cultural conservatives) over and against a "them" (everyone else) that makes suffering a precondition for political subjectivity.<sup>21</sup> Jeffress' rhetoric summons an American subject who understands themselves in opposition to cultural pluralism and implores them to define their identity in terms of suffering and persecution.<sup>22</sup> This is crucial to his appeal, for it consummates a Christian nationalist fantasy of an oppressive state and rhetorically manufactures the conditions that call forth an aggrieved Christian identity to reclaim "America."

### **Redemption**

If America's broken covenant is the source of its moral and millennialist decline, Jeffress presents national redemption as a battle of good and evil that will return America to greatness only when Christian nationalists confront and take back America from the secularists, atheists, and infidels who oppress them. Since he posits that America was originally established for and by orthodox Christians, Jeffress' vision for redemption participates in a larger culture war narrative in which cultural plurality and social difference are depicted as infidelity to the will of his imagined Christian God. Jeffress' remarks reveal a vision of political judgment that is flattened into rigid moral absolutes, where complex sociohistorical and cultural change is reduced to a moral melodrama predicated on a willfully self-destructive refusal to submit to divine commands. He depicts a political and moral universe marked not by the internal struggle within every person over good and evil, but rather by a struggle between the innocent (true "Christians") and the guilty (nonbelievers, secularists, infidels) over conduct shaping the fate of the nation.

Since the movement posits that the legitimacy of American government derives from its commitment to a particular orthodox Christian religious and cultural heritage, and not from its democratic form, Christian nationalism presents a direct threat to a pluralistic American society. Intellectual and cultural pluralism cannot coexist with a movement that holds that the beliefs and conduct of non-Christian Americans stand in the way of the fulfillment of the Christian nationalist eschatological vision of America. Christian nationalism seeks more than a recognition of Christian religious heritage, for it is a political theology that demands an American ethnonationalist state in its image.

It should be noted that when Jeffress calls for taking America back from Christian nationalism's enemies, he does not make explicit calls for violence. However, what makes Christian nationalist rhetoric dangerous for American liberal democracy is that



many do. The Christian nationalist movement is not afraid to use violence to fulfill its fantasy of American national redemption. As Whitehead and Perry note, Christian nationalism “baptizes authoritarian rule” and “justifies the preservation of order with righteous violence.”<sup>23</sup>

The events of January 6 demonstrate the violent lengths Christian nationalists are willing to take to heed Jeffress’ call to fulfill their fantasy of national redemption. The infamous QAnon Shaman, for example, led his fellow insurrectionists on January 6 in a Christian nationalist prayer in the vacated Senate chambers, saying “Thank you Heavenly Father for being the inspiration needed to these police officers to allow us into the building, to allow us to exercise our rights, to allow us to send a message to all the tyrants, the communists, and the globalists that this is our nation not theirs, that we will not allow the America—the American way, of the United States of America—to go down.”<sup>24</sup> Congresswoman Lauren Boebert has on numerous occasions advocated for the end of a separation of church and state, arguing that “the church is supposed to direct the government. The government is not supposed to direct the church. That is how our Founding Fathers intended it.”<sup>25</sup> Each of these examples outlines the Christian nationalist desire to replace cultural difference and agonistic disagreement over sociopolitical values with Christian purity in their image, be it through violence or state coercion if necessary.

### **William Barber**

The Poor People’s Campaign was originally planned by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a campaign against poverty in America. He proposed the idea to his closest advisors in August 1967 out of a deep sense of despair about the social conditions and historical trajectory of the United States. Toward the end of his life, he had come to recognize that salvation for the American experiment was only possible through deep structural changes and an even deeper spiritual revolution of values that prioritized human needs over racism and the defense of property.<sup>26</sup> For King, the Poor People’s Campaign was an effort to bring about a revolution of values to, by his estimation, literally save the soul of America. Ultimately, it would be his final campaign for social change, as he was assassinated in April of 1968.<sup>27</sup>

In the summer of 2018, 50 years after King’s death, a coalition of faith and social justice organizations brought his vision for the Poor People’s Campaign into the 21st century. Led by Bishop Dr. William J. Barber II and the Reverend Dr. Liz Theoharis, a broad coalition of American citizens from all races, religions, social classes, and gender identifications began organizing opposition to what they have called “the interlocking evils of systemic racism poverty, ecological devastation, militarism and the war economy, and the distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism.”<sup>28</sup> The new Poor People’s Campaign began as an expansive wave of nonviolent direct action in state houses across 40 states, and gave birth to a groundswell of grassroots organizations that now operates in all 50 states.

For the remainder of our paper, we analyze Barber’s skillful use of the jeremiad as a form of progressive prophetic critique. His sermon “We Are Called to Be a Movement,” which he first delivered on June 3, 2018, as part of the launch of the new Poor People’s Campaign, is emblematic of the Black tradition of the jeremiad and can be understood as a response to that of Christian nationalists, such as Jeffress.

### *The covenant*

The first major point of difference between Barber and Jeffress begins with their naming of a chosen people. Barber leans heavily upon a framing of the providential people through the metaphor of Israel's bondage under Egyptian slavery. If Christian nationalists name the patrician and propertied elite of the founding period as a chosen people, Barber counters with a strong emphasis on the condition of bondage. For Barber, the metaphor of Israel holds meaning only to the extent that it helps us recognize that bondage and suffering is a universal condition that deserves our recognition and sympathy, be it under Egyptian slavery, American slavery, colonialism, or capitalist wage slavery. Unlike Jeffress, Barber supports his position by referencing Bible verses that make the crafting of unjust laws and indifference to unnecessary suffering and social misery a foundation for clarifying the nature of God's covenant with all peoples who suffer in bondage. He cites Isaiah 10:1, Psalm 118, and Luke 4—"The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone! This is God's work"—to establish the socially marginalized and rejected as a providential people. The covenant with God is forged in the suffering that accompanies the dehumanization of civil society and the state rejection. Who are the rejected that comprise the metaphorical nation of Israel? Barber explains, stating:

We can't understand how God could use so many outsiders and misfits throughout the Scriptures, apart from the insight that God uses the rejected to lead the moral revival of nations. It's why God speaks to Moses—the one with a stutter—and calls him to be spokesman for a people hard-pressed under Pharaoh. Because rejected stones make the best cornerstones.<sup>29</sup>

Upon establishing his theological hermeneutic, he then proceeds to name the rejected in our present era, stating, "In America's long story, we have a lot of stones that have been rejected. Policy violence and rejection have too often been our legacy."<sup>30</sup>

The "we" Barber refers to is also dramatically more inclusive than whom Jeffress refers to. To be sure, Barber recognizes the suffering of communities that Jeffress dismisses as "infidels," morally depraved, and un-Christian. Barber chronicles the history of oppressed peoples in the United States, beginning with the indigenous Native Americans, slaves and their Black descendants, women, poor whites, immigrants and ethnic minorities, and sexual minorities. He then cites Matthew 25:45 to stipulate the conditions of a covenant: "nations will be judged by whether we care for Jesus himself when he comes to us poor and homeless, sick and sore, as a prisoner or a refugee."<sup>31</sup> Thus, like the Israelites under Egyptian slavery, Barber uses the legacy of violence and oppression to name a common chosen people united by struggle across differences of racial identity, religious identity, gender, sexuality, and class, and political affiliation to form a covenant on the basis of equality. Fidelity to the suffering poor and the rejected through just policies that promote social and economic equality for all people, accordingly, becomes the basis for the covenant with God.

### *Falling away*

If the rejected are a chosen people, Barber laments the falling away from the covenant as an abandonment of the suffering poor and the rejected through unjust laws that

dehumanize them. The covenant he names also identifies the political problem the Poor People's Campaign seeks to correct; that is, an unjust political system made possible by sinful public officials who write laws that enable the rich and powerful to prey upon and exploit the suffering poor and the rejected. Toward this end, Barber cites Isaiah 10:1–2, which decries those who make unjust laws that deprive the poor and perpetuate injustice.<sup>32</sup> This becomes the basis for his claim that poverty and suffering is not the result of individual failures so much as it is a systemic phenomenon enabled by the morally corrupt priorities of those who rule and enact unjust policies that favor the rich at the expense of everyone else. If Jeffress emphasized the role of law in crafting a wall of separation between church and state, “falling away” for Barber includes a lengthy list of indictments against neoliberal policies that have brought misery to the poor and the rejected, including extreme wealth inequality, lack of healthcare coverage, assaults on voting rights and immigrant communities, fracking on indigenous reservations and in poor white communities, the Flint water crisis, and excessive military spending at the expense of public education and healthcare.<sup>33</sup>

It is important to emphasize that Barber does not use the term “neoliberal” in this sermon, but he does use the term often to name the policies that betray the fundamental values underlying the covenant.<sup>34</sup> Barber strategically utilizes the term “neoliberalism” to critique the bipartisan consensus that underlies America's systemic inequities and militarism. In this way, Barber can be understood as critiquing the plurality of forms neoliberalism can take in American politics, which Nancy Fraser has documented as “progressive,” “reactionary,” and “hyper-reactionary.”<sup>35</sup>

Crucially, for Barber, “falling away” includes not just unjust laws that inflict systemic harm, but also the rise of heretical Biblical hermeneutics that justify unjust laws and dehumanize those who suffer from them. Barber's “falling away” envelopes a critique of Christian nationalism and the role it has played in perverting the Gospels to provide rhetorical cover for neoliberal policies, stating:

When a distorted moral narrative of religious nationalism doesn't follow the call of Jesus that asks nations, “when I was hungry, did you feed me? When I was naked, did you clothe me? When I was a stranger—when I was an immigrant, when I was undocumented—did you care for me?” but instead preaches a false gospel of division and building walls and says so much about what God says so little and so little about what God says so much, then the politics of rejection and policy violence against the poor are still far too real.<sup>36</sup>

Barber equates Christian nationalists with the “paid religionists” of the era of Jesus, which recalls Martin Luther King, Jr.'s life-long conviction that any religion that is “concerned about the souls of men and is not concerned about the social and economic conditions that scar the soul, is a spiritually moribund religion.”<sup>37</sup> By naming Christian nationalism as heretical, he makes space for progressive Christian across all denominations to identify with the movement and its cause.

## **Redemption**

If America's broken covenant is the source of its moral and social malaise, Barber presents national redemption as a struggle to unify the suffering poor and the rejected toward a reconstruction of America.

We must be honest about the foundations of the political and economic systems we call America. I love America because of her potential. But I know that America will never complete the work of reconstruction—will never even get close to being a more perfect union—until we are honest about her past and the politics of rejection.<sup>38</sup>

I want you to know today with no doubt in my mind that I believe by the Holy Ghost when the hands that once picked cotton join Latino hands and progressive white hands, faith hands and labor hands, Asian hands and Native American hands, poor hands and wealthy hands with a conscience, gay hands, straight hands, and trans hands—when all those hands link up together, we can become an instrument of redemption and reconstruction.<sup>39</sup>

The stakes of America's broken covenant are high, for the cumulative misery and suffering inflicted on the poor and the rejected are not just a moral problem, but the very underpinning of a deeper political crisis that threatens American liberal democracy itself. According to Barber, the United States has undergone two historic periods of Reconstruction: the first Reconstruction came after the Civil War, and the second Reconstruction accompanied the civil rights struggles of the 20th century. What is required for redemption, however, is a third Reconstruction capable of transcending the unjust laws and policies of neoliberalism that afflict systemic misery and transforming American democracy.

The third Reconstruction requires the implementation of a progressive social democratic set of policies to redouble America's fidelity to its covenant of equality. The new Poor People's Campaign has proposed a "Poor People's Moral Budget," which outlines a platform for universal healthcare, housing, renewed voting rights protections, civil rights protections for immigrant and queer communities, and a slew of remedial social policies aimed at revising the tax code, taxing the 1% and multinational corporations, and ending extreme poverty and wealth inequality.<sup>40</sup> The movement's policy vision for reconstruction was introduced as House Resolution 438 during the 117th Congress.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to contribute to studies of dissent, prophecy, and the threat posed by illiberal populism. Barber reveals important insights into the ways prophecy and the jeremiad can be marshaled in unexpected ways. Our analysis challenges scholarship that presumes the jeremiad is a fundamentally conservative genre, for Barber demonstrates how it can be leveraged for radical critiques in a time of illiberalism and the threat of democratic backsliding.<sup>42</sup>

Barber also complicates the assumption that prophecy is a form of speech that refuses audience adaptation.<sup>43</sup> Barber illustrates how prophetic orators can speak in the vernacular of their love of America without compromising the radicalism of their critique of injustice. Barber's jeremiad thus fulfills the requirements of prophetic dissent, for he is at once critical of and faithful to America. Indeed, Barber's skillful use of the jeremiad offers a rhetorical blueprint for enacting a prophetic critique of American politics that strategically leverages the norms and mythos of American culture for the purpose of agitating against it. His progressive jeremiad names America's founding covenant in terms of a vision of equality that substantively involves not only the recognition of cultural difference across a multitude of diverse identities, but also a commitment to dismantling and

democratizing the maladies of American neoliberal capitalism. The new Poor People's Campaign offers a provocative narrative and textual strategy that infuses populist, identitarian, and class-based appeals with a moral tone of righteous rage. In this way, it offers a form of dissent capable of challenging Christian nationalism, since it evokes prophetic language, as Ivie puts it, "toward the realignment of common sense" and against a "narrow definition of the common good."<sup>44</sup>

Prophetic dissent offers a compelling case for Rhetorical Studies to continue to examine closely, since it expresses sharp, even radical, political criticism within the normative cultural bounds of American public life. Prophetic voices can call forth a "we" whose past they narrate in terms of an American republic composed of subaltern communities mired in suffering. Prophetic dissent represents a vibrant and dynamic idiom rooted deep within America's democratic tradition that has positioned itself as a rhetorical resource critics and citizens have employed to break silences and testify to the failures of American democracy to fulfill its promise of equality to communities mired in social misery. Indeed, it offers a public language and mode of symbolic action well established within American public culture that enables radical critiques of American political life that confront it on the very central and primary principles it claims to stand upon.

## Notes

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13. Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 114–15. Given West's contribution our understanding of the prophetic tradition, we feel obligated to cite his work. However, we believe that his current candidacy for the U.S. presidency is misguided and dangerous. We believe that Barber's advocacy and social movement organizing is a more effective strategy for promoting social change than

a third-party presidential campaign, which makes studying Barber all the more important at this time.

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16. Shulman, *American Prophecy*, 35–35.
17. Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2020), 151.
18. Whitehead and Perry, *Taking America Back for God*, 161.
19. Robert Jeffress, “America is a Christian Nation,” YouTube Video, 49:36, August 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0MYOr90CkDU>.
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22. Jonathan J. Edwards, “Memes, condensation symbols, and the changing landscape of political rhetoric,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 39, no. 1 (2022): 29–41; Anthea Butler, *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 137–48.
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39. Barber II, *We are Called to Be a Movement*, 59–60.
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### **Disclosure statement**

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