

*The Universe Bends Toward Justice:  
Radical Reflections on the Church,  
the Bible, and the Body Politic*

OBERY M. HENDRICKS  
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Obery M. Hendricks' *The Universe Bends Toward Justice* is a rigorous, highly nuanced, and skillful treatment of the paucity of prophetic Christian witness and critique in the church and in society. The author, who is an ordained elder in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, as well as an acclaimed scholar and intellectual and former seminary president, marshals significant evidence in setting forth the thesis that things have gone seriously awry in a nation that claims direct descent from the maker of all things. Not one to leave the reader languishing in some netherworld of political correctness or convoluted intellectualisms, Hendricks calls by name the besetting sin and deviltry that would rend the nation, with its lofty ideals of unanimity and love of truth, into a curious, contemptible *mélange* of atomistic, social hierarchies that bow at the great altar of Spencerian economic and social theory. "We are living in insane times," says Hendricks, "Like purveyors of a bad Orwellian joke, the religious right and right-wing politicians have hijacked the meanings of justice and equity and cynically perverted them into their very opposites." For the author, this tattered *re-inversion* of the Nietzschean "transvaluation of values" has led to "bizarre and unconscionable results" in both civic life and in the *ekklesia*—the assembly of those *called out* to bear witness to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.

Bound together by a common cord of intellectual inquiry, this series of essays seeks to "[Recover] the political radicality of the message of Jesus and the prophetic witness of the Hebrew Bible from the clutches of those who are devastating our society, our body politic, and our natural environment . . ." At first blush, this is no mean task for a book that spans just over two-hundred pages and whose first chapter is entitled "I am the Holy Dope Dealer," from an interview in *Vibe* magazine of Kirk Franklin, the prince of urban contemporary Gospel music. Yet, even in this opening essay, one cannot help but sense a subtle but unrelenting provisional hypothesis. Indeed, there is an over-arching metanarrative that on one hand informs and defines the commonalities (and especially the dissimilarities) between the prophetic consciousness of the Spirituals, and what for the author is the well-nigh nullifidian emphases of Gospel music; and on the other hand nourishes the fecund *anti*-minds of right-wing religionists, politicians, and prosperity preachers, whose "pernicious influence," says Hendricks, "seems to increase daily." For Hendricks, Gospel music bears in common with the Spirituals the proud influence of a deep embodiment of purposive, emotive sound. "We know what it

means,” says Hendricks, “to lift up holy hands in tearful supplication and joyful thanksgiving.” What has been lost along the way to the proximate freedom and circumscribed justice that persons of African descent partake of today, however, is a sense of collective, corporate purpose. “What this means,” says Hendricks, “is that at best, the social orientation of Gospel music today is unmindful of the ongoing social, political, and economic dilemmas that confront black people in America.” For the author Gospel music lacks a sense of social and political foresight; a vision of a world redeemed yet upwrought and still in need of redemption; a world beset before and beyond by the maladies and miseries of neglect for the idea of *Euangelion* as it spoke to our sainted forebears.

For Hendricks, (and not a few others who have been nurtured and sustained by the deep spirituality of the Black Church tradition), Gospel music has succumbed to an “apocalyptic apoliticality,” the primary concern of which is to get one’s “praise on” and pray that they “make it in,” with little or no regard, however, for the suffering and despair of God’s creation. Dr. Hendricks states the problem succinctly:

Gospel music *has* come to function as an opiate for the masses. As with a drug, sensations and emotions have come to be its focus. Like a drug, its primary goal is not to empower its users to change reality, but simply to change the way they feel. Like a drug, it temporarily lifts the people’s despair yet, in direct contradistinction to the prophetic mandate of the spirituals, leaves the causes of that despair virtually unaddressed, unscathed, even unmentioned.

According to Hendricks, “rather than collective acknowledgment of oppression, Gospel offers individualized expressions of hope and praise. . . the classic apocalyptic feeling of powerlessness to forestall the oppressive forces of this world, accompanied by a sense of resignation to continued social misery . . . .” This need for *personal* praise and relationality, and the foregrounding of the idea of a private spirituality bereft of commonly held and expressed prophetic unction, is the unutterable scourge of the Gospel music industry. “Gospel music,” says Hendricks, “must stop reducing the causes of human suffering to weak faith or poor morality on the part of the victim.” The dialectical tension created by this tendency to endow theological, economic, and social theories with emphases that privilege the felicitous few over against the disenfranchised masses is a recurring thematic element that holds these wide-ranging, literate, and often joyously prophetic essays together across a broad span of intellectual disciplines.

Whether offering critical analyses of Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* or Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*, or critically exegeting the Attic Greek in the historiography of Thucydides, Hendricks fervently makes the case for a reading of history and of the sacred texts of the Christian faith that points to what liberation theologians call the “preferential option for the poor,” foregrounding the lives of those for whom life’s stairway has often been bare and splintered. This way of reading privileges a holistic understanding of the human story, and challenges the primacy

of place that the Western intellectual tradition has given to the few for whom the subtle realities of chance and the gross iniquity of an arbitrary fleeting biological unintentionality have given more than they may reasonably consume in “a time, and times, and half a time.” “We must . . . explicitly embrace ways of reading the Gospels,” says Hendricks, “that are methodologically sensitive to the plights and circumstances, concerns, interests, and worldviews of those below . . . .”

A former Wall Street investment executive, Hendricks’ passion and intellectual dexterity are palpably evident in chapters three and four where issues of class and “anti-Christian” economic theory receive a thorough and meticulous treatment. From Jean-Baptiste Say, to Adam Smith, to John Maynard Keynes; from Say’s Law, to Smith’s “invisible hand,” to Keynes’s *General Theory*, the author dissects and analyzes these important theories with the mind of an academic and the heart of a prophet. Indeed, for Hendricks, “. . . conservative economic principles reflect no evidence of being influenced by biblical morality and ethical imperatives of responsibility for . . . the disadvantaged and the vulnerable.” Wittingly or not much of this lack of concern for the “least of these” points to what Hendricks calls “the American myth of heroic individualism”—the foundational myth upon which the theory of American exceptionalism has been built.

A very telling passage from the text deserves to be quoted in full:

This enduring social myth is a vestige of the social history of the pioneers who settled the American West by virtue of their own individual grit and mettle. This myth holds as its central value the belief that all people must make their own way in the world based on their own merits and inner resources . . . . Thus the rich deserve to be rich; the poor deserve to be poor.

For Hendricks, not only does the uncritical acceptance of the American myth lead to a dire distortion of “economic life and social choices today,” it is, in fine, anti-biblical and *anti-Christ*. And if it is *anti-Christ*, it is enmity against God.

*The Universe Bends Toward Justice* is a book that must be read by those who love the church. But its scope is such that it reaches beyond the church or mere Christianity. It is a book for all those who love justice and are unwilling to accept the penchant for a divisive framing of economic and social issues by the conservative and reactionary fringe in politics *and* religion. A book that faithfully challenges the bloated, irreligious conflation of biblical morality and racist, classist, social theory—offering instead the Good News of deliverance of the captives, and the healing of the brokenhearted. But more than that, it is a love letter to a nation; a prophetic “on-time” word from a committed scholar, preacher, and public intellectual—for such a time as this.

DWAYNE MEADOWS  
UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY