Kate Bowler, *Blessed: a History of the American Prosperity Gospel.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xi + 337 incl. 37 figs and 4 tables.

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Kate Bowler's valuable but rather unfocused study of the prosperity gospel is enormously ambitious. Starting from a list of 1400 megachurches, she used an "imperfect art of labeling" (249) to identify 115 of them, including several of the largest churches in the United States, as prosperity churches. (Not all self-identified this way.) She visited about thirty of these, "attended almost all major conferences" (261), and did participant-observation in a small prosperity congregation. She used a "graphing algorithm" (46) to cross-reference 4,267 speakers at 1,637 conferences advertised in *Charisma* magazine and generate diagrams documenting their interactions. She even toured Israel with a group led by evangelist Benny Hinn, where a co-traveler urged her to vomit up a demon and heal herself.

She also read enough to attempt a sweeping historical synthesis in which two themes vie for supremacy. First, she identifies a core cohort, traceable to E. W. Kenyon, which blended Holiness-Pentecostalism with New Thought. It stressed mind-power and the "legal right" of believers to make demands on God. Kenneth Hagin and Oral Roberts extended this tradition and promoted the idea that God multiplies investments made as tithes. Bowler traces this cohort's growth through 1950s healing revivals, charismatic

movements and televangelists of the 1960s-1990s, and the rise of "soft prosperity" leaders like Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, and T.D. Jakes. Second, she treats parallel developments relating this core group to a huge cohort jockeying around its edges, including metaphysical approaches, positive thinkers, gospel of wealth traditions reaching back toward Puritans, and generic individualists. Black preachers gradually merge into her inner group—Hagin's protégé Frederick Price, Roberts' protégé Carlton Pearson, Creflo Dollar, and several with a foot in black denominations—while other African-Americans drop in and out of her outer cohort: Father Divine, Reverend Ike, black spiritualists (a rare place where Catholicism is part of her genealogy), and hoodoo practitioners. Latino evangelists briefly appear, exhibiting "potency… as a new liberation theology" (204).

Readers processing all this information may struggle to discern the organizing logic. Chains of influence and distinctions between tendencies are often murky, and Bowler's discussion of criteria for identifying prosperity churches is relegated to appendix B. Her chronology begins like an exploration of a river's headwaters where it is difficult to discern why Kenyon is the main channel. Thereafter she seems undecided whether to focus on the Pentecostal stream culminating in her *Charisma* network diagrams—or whether (as her evidence suggests) this is more like a lake in which Kenyon *et. al.* are ripples amid multiple waves. She wants it both ways—sometimes implying that her core group drives the process, but since this frequently makes no sense, introducing disclaimers and/or letting readers guess at the logic of her selections.

Murkier than relations among Bowler's core and maximal cohorts is how they relate to the surrounding culture. She makes sweeping claims about the prosperity movement coming to mirror "America"—or translated more defensibly, about how her inner cohort grew and her maximal cohort wielded steady influence, overlapping with aspects of the culture that Barbara Ehrenreich calls "bright-sided." Unfortunately, Bowler favors formulations like "the cultural mood" of entire decades or even centuries. She provides no clear or consistent baseline of discourses or socio-economic practices to relate to her cohorts, and she barely addresses scholarly work about change introduced by consumerism and postmodernity. Consequently this dimension of her argument fails to advance beyond an imprecise and shifting punditry.

Around the book's midpoint, Bowler largely abandons chronology. Her channel reaches a delta where it diffuses in all directions and the reader's new challenge is to discern how the content fits her announced themes of wealth, victory, and (the best developed) health. Repeatedly she stops and starts her train of thought for descriptive vignettes based on church visits. If there is any implied drift in her current, it may be that soft prosperity is infusing her cohort(s) or U.S. culture. Less-developed issues include global dimensions of the movement and women becoming somewhat less subordinate.

Overall Bowler aims for a descriptive voice—tilting toward the apologetic, as when she notes that prosperity believers are not much poorer than other citizens and/or may simply be trying to survive rather than live in luxury—but one can discern criticism. Although she is sometimes content to posit that prosperity teachings mirror a free market—so that her social analysis echoes her protagonists' dubious preaching—she also

notes that we could identify realities against which prosperity teaching appears hollow or ideological. After all, if faith guarantees success, the flip side is that failure is one's own fault. One preacher even tells Bowler that blacks deserved enslavement due to "God's judgment on African witchcraft" (160). As an everyday practice, prosperity religion includes pervasive taboos on "negative confession" (that is, acknowledging that one's maximum hopes for healing and wealth are not entirely fulfilled as of yet.) All such thinking is relentlessly suppressed through teaching and ritual. Since documenting this dynamic is arguably Bowler's biggest contribution, it is puzzling how seldom her apologetic instincts take the form of criticizing prosperity leaders who exploit their followers, nor (more importantly since leaders may be sincere) focusing on back-and-forth negotiations between leaders' promises and how followers concretely receive and use them. Although she does include some such analysis, it is underdeveloped in her overall framing and amid her preponderance of discussion. It seems obvious that she chose to hold back evidence on this front, and one wonders why.

Overall, Bowler expends admirable effort analyzing this major phenomenon and provides much useful information. Readers who approach her book seeking one clear and critical train of thought may sometimes find it disappointing. However, if we interpret the book's murkiness as a symptomatic mirror of murkiness on the ground, its virtues appear in a bright light.