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Blessed: A History Of The American Prosperity Gospel



Synopsis

How have millions of American Christians come to measure spiritual progress in terms of their financial status and physical well-being? How has the movement variously called Word of Faith, Health and Wealth, Name It and Claim It, or simply prosperity gospel come to dominate much of our contemporary religious landscape? Kate Bowler's *Blessed* is the first book to fully explore the origins, unifying themes, and major figures of a burgeoning movement that now claims millions of followers in America. Bowler traces the roots of the prosperity gospel: from the touring mesmerists, metaphysical sages, pentecostal healers, business oracles, and princely prophets of the early 20th century; through mid-century positive thinkers like Norman Vincent Peale and revivalists like Oral Roberts and Kenneth Hagin; to today's hugely successful prosperity preachers. Bowler focuses on such contemporary figures as Creflo Dollar, pastor of Atlanta's 30,000-member World Changers Church International; Joel Osteen, known as "the smiling preacher," with a weekly audience of seven million; T. D. Jakes, named by *Time* magazine one of America's most influential new religious leaders; Joyce Meyer, evangelist and women's empowerment guru; and many others. At almost any moment, day or night, the American public can tune in to these preachers-on TV, radio, podcasts, and in their megachurches-to hear the message that God desires to bless them with wealth and health. Bowler offers an interpretive framework for scholars and general readers alike to understand the diverse expressions of Christian abundance as a cohesive movement bound by shared understandings and common goals.

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Customer Reviews

The most controversial aspect of the so-called prosperity gospel is its radical claim to transform invisible faith into financial rewards. • Poverty and illness are signs of spiritual malaise, for God wants us to be wealthy, healthy, and live to our full potential in victory here on earth. Preached by Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, and others, the prosperity gospel teaches that Jesus' death and resurrection overcame not only sin and death but also poverty and disease. Believers, therefore, may claim wealth and health as part of their divine inheritance. Bowler argues the allure is actually optimism, not financial success. The message of the prosperity gospel channels America's can-do spirit and its belief that the future can be changed for the better through hard work. Her book is an important account of an audacious contemporary religious phenomenon, albeit one that scandalizes many. It also serves as an invitation to reflect upon the relationship of religion and money. --Christopher McConnell

"[A] magnificent study."--Heath W. Carter, *Journal of Cultural Economy*"Highly entertaining...and deeply human."--David F. Ruccio, *Journal of Cultural Economy*"Very readable and engaging...Blessed is the best history of the development of the prosperity gospel written to date. It is an important addition to the library of pastors or scholars who regularly encounter the prosperity gospel in their ministry."--*Southwestern Journal of Theology*"Bowler shows how the prosperity gospel movement has drawn from multiple denominational, racial, ethnic, and even secular subtraditions. She identifies both the dazzling diversity and the common understandings that have given the prosperity gospel coherence" --*Christian Century*"Bowler's respect for her subjects and her ability to locate them in the larger American religious narrative mean that serious scholars dismiss the prosperity gospel at their own peril. Bowler shows us that its deep roots and vibrant future, even after the recent recession, place it solidly in the category of religious movements to watch." --*Church History*"Marvelous this is a stunningly empathetic book. By pushing far beyond caricature, Bowler has produced a must-read for anyone who wants to understand the prosperity gospel and how it is, even now, remaking the American religious landscape." --*The Christian Century*"An important account of an audacious contemporary religious phenomenon." --*Booklist*"[A] riveting historical account." --*Publishers Weekly*"The 'prosperity gospel' is as much despised by its detractors as it is embraced by its millions of adherents. Yet until Kate Bowler's *Blessed*, no one has attempted a balanced, informative, inquisitive survey. Her book is a metaphorical godsend for those with an outsider's curiosity about one of the fastest growing religious movements in contemporary America and a literal one for those inside." -- Mark A. Noll, author of *Protestantism: A Very Short Introduction* "Though often maligned and misunderstood, Bowler's comprehensive and exciting

examination of the prosperity gospel demonstrates the ways 'health and wealth' has been a staple of American Protestant life since the 19th century. Blessed provides a thorough and nuanced account of the phenomenon, as it skillfully examines varying attitudes toward prosperity which emerged across racial, regional, and denominational lines. This is a grand contribution to the field of American religious history." -- Jonathan L. Walton, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals and Professor of Religion and Society, Harvard University "This book propels Kate Bowler into the first rank of younger historians of religion in America. The author's keen ear, her perceptive insights, and her command of history make this a remarkable and unforgettable book-and her conclusion that the 'prosperity gospel consecrated America's culture of optimism' rings very true." -- Randall Balmer, author of *Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory: A Journey into the Evangelical Subculture in America* "Blessed is worthwhile reading for what it is-a history of the prosperity gospel and not a theology of the prosperity movement. I've benefited from time spent working through it and would recommend it to those seeking to learn about this topic." --The Gospel Coalition "Blessed is a good history of the rise and flourishing of the gospel." --The Blade "...[A]n unprecedented historical examination of health and wealth as spiritual subjects in American Christianity by tracing the rise, development, and transformation of the prosperity gospel in the United States." --Religious Studies Review

A truly wonderful book. Having experienced the emotional manipulation and contradictions in charismatic Christianity, this combination of academic rigour and readability was literally balm to my now secular humanist soul.

Good chronicle of the rise of the prosperity gospel from its 19th century transcendentalism to the present. Specific movements are left wanting in favor of the wider brush. Recommend this work to folks wanting an over view of the subject matter in its American context.

Book was a scholarly review of the prosperity gospel. It was exactly what I was looking for.

Interesting read and comment on our society.

Dr. Bowler's wit and charm make this book an easy but well informed and highly intelligent read. It paints a breath taking portrait of the prosperity gospel(beauty marks and warts). It's well worth your time.

Compelling narratives and scholarly research!

Love this! Excellent work of scholarship.

Blessed is based on the author's well-researched doctoral dissertation and is a frank but relatively unbiased examination of a modern religious phenomenon emphasizing a realized eschatology achieved via apotropaic utterances and echoing gnostic dualism and insider knowledge. She does not ignore the shortcomings of traditional churches, especially excessive otherworldliness, which contributed to the rise of Prosperity, and she addresses how the movement deals with problems such as lack of Scriptural warrant, bad luck, death, the lavish lifestyle of many of its leaders, and healings that fall apart. While she is sometimes not well organized and while her transitions are often choppy, Ms Bowler's treatment is very rewarding, not only as a study of a particularly American cultus but also of how it illuminates the workings of human nature.

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