

# God and country

by [David Harrington Watt](#) in the [October 18, 2003](#) issue

*Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance.* By Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini. New York University Press, 175 pp., \$22.95.

*Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History.* By James A. Morone. Yale University Press, 575 pp., \$35.00.

Alabama is where I grew up, where most of my family still lives and where I've spent a fair amount of time lately. During the past summer the state's citizens were asked to consider a new tax plan, which Governor Bob Riley, its chief proponent, sometimes referred to as "biblical" in orientation. Riley said that the Bible teaches us that we must love God, love one another and live in ways that do not oppress the poor. He asserted that Alabama's old system of taxation, which was by all accounts astonishingly regressive, led to the oppression of poor people. He wanted to overhaul the entire system to make it better accord with biblical standards.

At times polls seemed to suggest that Riley's plan might possibly be approved by voters. A number of the state's most prominent Christian organizations endorsed it. But on September 9, when Alabamians went to the polling booths, the tax proposal went down to defeat. In most parts of the world a politician who spent much time talking about the Bible while trying to push through a new tax plan would be seen as something of a crank. In many nations Christian influence on politics is viewed with suspicion. According to press reports, Britain's Prime Minister Tony Blair was recently told by his advisers that it would be unwise of him to end a speech with a phrase such as "God bless you." Such an ending struck them as excessively pious. Blair fumed, but he left the phrase out.

In Alabama, on the other hand, the public sphere is drenched in Christian language. When one of my cousins started trying cases in the Alabama courts, he soon determined that he had better start carrying a Bible in his briefcase. Jurors would stare at him blankly when he quoted Marshall or Brandeis, but would perk up when he quoted Jesus or Paul. And, of course, most of the citizens of Alabama cannot for the life of them see how anyone could object to the huge Ten Commandments

monument that used to sit in the atrium of the state's judicial building. The monument, they think, simply expressed an obvious truth: the laws of this nation rest upon a Judeo-Christian foundation.

The scholars who wrote *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* probably have not spent much time in Alabama. Both live in New York City: Ann Pellegrini is a professor at New York University; Janet Jakobsen directs Barnard's Center for Research on Women. But the world evoked by their book (a world in which the categories of Protestant Christianity are, as often as not, the categories in which people talk about politics) is one that Alabamians know firsthand. It is a world in which there has never really been a wall separating churches from civil authority, and in which the political and the religious often seem inseparable.

Indeed, Jakobsen and Pellegrini make a good case that the Christian religion and politics are closely linked in every region of the United States. That inseparability might be particularly obvious in the Bible Belt. But in the contemporary U.S.--in places like Colorado, New York and the District of Columbia--there is no fundamental separation between church and state. They argue that there is a real sense in which the U.S. still has a de facto, but quite real, religious establishment. Christian organizations and Christian discourse shape political processes in ways that are too deeply enmeshed in our traditions for us to notice.

Jakobsen and Pellegrini are appalled by this establishment of the Christian religion--partly because they think that Christian categories and practices are often unhelpful, and partly because they are keenly aware of the ways in which the establishment of Christianity limits freedom. Focusing particularly on the regulation of sexuality, they argue that it often seems natural to us to assume that Christian morality is the proper basis for deciding which sexual practices are worthy of legitimating and which must be censured and punished. They suggest that Christian-inflected morality tempts us to believe that homosexuals are, at best, people who do not fully conform to norms and who, at most, should be tolerated. Being tolerated, Jakobsen and Pellegrini insist, is very far from having freedom.

Some readers will find the book's arguments unconvincing. But few will find them boring, since they are advanced with wit and flair. Perhaps the worst thing that can be said about this book is that many readers are likely to find it too challenging. Though it is not a difficult read, it pushes us to consider the possibility that our own

fundamental assumptions about freedom, morality, Christianity and sexuality might be just plain mistaken.

Some of the historians who have read *Hellfire Nation*, which explores the history of the relationship between religion and politics in America, have declared that it is not a great book. It is not hard to see why this has happened. James Morone is a political science professor at Brown University, not a historian, and his knowledge of American cultural history seems to have come largely from reading secondary sources. He gets some of the details of that history wrong, and he sometimes seems to be out of touch with recent developments in historiography. Morone displays a surprising lack of interest in all aspects of history that do not have to do either with the Puritans or with people who can be seen as heirs of the Puritan tradition. Moreover, his attempt to analyze America's various religio-moral discourses, which hinges on a distinction between Victorianism and the Social Gospel, lacks nuance. This is not, therefore, a book that many specialists are going to clasp to their bosoms.

But those are not the readers that Morone had in mind. He has written a book for people with no special training in American cultural history. His aim seems to be to meditate on the long history of Christian-based political movements. He wants to encourage people to rethink the possibilities and limitations of the American tendency to conflate religion and politics.

Morone has succeeded in meeting these worthwhile goals, and he has done so through a set of engrossing narratives. *Hellfire Nation*, like *Love the Sin*, is actually fun to read. Though it is too long for readers to gulp down in one sitting, many will be tempted to try to do so.

Though the book occasionally points out the ways in which Christianity's influence on American politics has been silly or dangerous, Morone often leans over backwards to emphasize Christianity's positive effects. It is almost as if he began his research with a deep distrust of mixing politics and Christianity and then, as he learned more, became increasingly impressed with the contributions that the traditions of Christianity have made to American political culture. The role that Christianity played in the crusade to end slavery and in the liberal reform movements of the middle decades of the 20th century seem to have made a particularly deep impression on him.

Clearly, Marone hopes that Americans can find ways of rescuing Christian morality from the New Christian Right. And he certainly hopes that we will downplay the "Victorian" side of America's Christian heritage and reemphasize its "Social Gospel" side. If we can do that, Morone implies, then Christian morality could reinvigorate political life and make our country more just and free. I suspect that Morone's response to Governor Riley's "Christian" tax proposal would probably have been: "Sign me up; this is just the sort of thing that the American political system needs more of."

There is a part of me that sees the tax proposal that way, too. I am too rooted in the traditions of Protestant Christianity and too appreciative of the traditions of the left to keep from cheering, at least a little, for Riley's efforts to inject the logic of Amos and James into contemporary American politics. But as I have grown older I have become increasingly leery of such proposals. Increasingly I find the arguments advanced by people like Jakobsen and Pellegrini--arguments that American political discourse is already too Christian in its vocabulary and assumptions--hard to refute. Instead of supporting "more Christian" approaches to the nation's ills, perhaps we should be trying to imagine a nation in which both heterosexuality and Christianity have been thoroughly and genuinely disestablished.