

*Benjamin Shepard*

*Review*

*Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*  
by James A. Morone

reviewed by  
Benjamin Shepard

---

**I**t takes little more than a cursory glance at American politics to recognize that notions of morality and sin, right and wrong, basically set the process in motion and determine which policies move forward and which languish. Religious and moral fervor of one sort or another influence policy decisions regarding medicine, cell research, public health, civil rights, health care, social welfare, and countless others. While the U.S. constitution clearly delineates a separation between church and state, in practice the line frequently blurs. To the question, “Why wasn’t God mentioned in the constitution?” Alexander Hamilton is said to have sarcastically replied: “We forgot.” (p. 5)

The propensity to place God on one side or another of partisan arguments is a cornerstone of American politics. Yet the question remains: What is the impact of moral frenzy on American democracy? “What happens when our pragmatic, commonsense, split-the-difference American politics turns righteous?” James Morone asks in the introduction to his new work, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*, a study of U.S. politics as a response to sin, from Puritan Williamsburg to Prohibition. (p. x) For Morone, the answer is simple enough: checks and balances become little more than nuisances, easily manipulated with hysteria to shift public opinion. Compromise disappears; in its place lynchings, witch-hunts, get-tough laws, and race riots often follow. Women on public assistance become “welfare queens.” Labels, demonology, and zero-sum arguments win the day as political players are divided between “us” and “them,” and panic takes precedence over reasoned discourse.

Psychoanalysts describe such impulses in terms of hysteria, sociologists frame them in terms of moral panics and mob behavior, and historians consider the unique contours of generational red scares. Morone, a political scientist by trade, approaches the discussion of the moral panic impulse in American

political history as a study of broad themes and patterns that unfold over and over, generation after generation. (p. x)

“Panic spread across the nation,” Morone begins as he describes the conditions for the white slave panic of 1910. The author outlines the episode as a paradigmatic study of the politics of panic taking precedence over the use of evidence or actual data to verify that a problem actually exists. “Dangerous young men prowled across the country side. They lured girls into ice cream parlors, wooed them off to the cities, and sold them into sexual slavery,” he recounts. As things progressed, popular literature reported that some 60,000 women were disappearing into that sex slave trade each year. The papers printed warnings urging young women to stay away from German skating rinks, Chinese laundries, Italian fruit stands, and anything run by the Eastern European Jewry. President William Howard Taft demanded action. Congress, which generally considered crime a state issue, saw no way to ignore the social problem of slave trafficking. With little or no data to verify the substance of the claims, Congress outlawed taking women across state lines for illicit purposes in 1910. Enforcement was left to the little-known Bureau of Investigation, later renamed the Federal Bureau of Investigation. As funding increased, so did the agency’s power.

Yet the story does not end with the new precedent set for law enforcement. “When the moral champions finally marched into the sex districts, the enslaved maidens laughed at them,” Morone explains. “There were no iron bars on the brothels, no Jews skulking behind the doors, no sixty thousand perishing country girls.” (p. 2) But even after the mistake was recognized, federal power never receded. Instead, a familiar schema was set in place: 1) stir up a moral frenzy; 2) identify a demon; 3) mobilize interests; 4) increase police powers.

It is a model that unfolds in countless variations throughout the ensuing chapters of the book, from the Puritans encountering pestiferous Quakers, to Know-Nothings struggling over the strange customs of Catholics newcomers with their faith in an all-powerful despot in Rome, and so on. Immigrants arrive; social flux follows. By 1910, census reports confirmed what was already apparent to most Americans: the United States was becoming an urban nation, its cities filled with immigrants and their exotic ways. Urban mores posed threats to traditional ways of life. Vice thrived, political machines expanded, power shifted, and the culture changed. Profound anxiety helped translate social and economic flux into a moral crisis.

Immigrant villains lurked on the streets and calls for police intervention intensified. “Fearful Americans did not have to make much of a leap to a white slave panic. Stolen or not, country girls flocked to the cities, where they saw and did things they never saw or did back home.” While foreigners were not exactly stealing girls? or anyone else for the matter? they did bring new ways, which were seen as a threat to Anglo-Saxon values. “Even the label, ‘white slavery,’ emits a racial jolt,” Morone concludes. (p. 2)

For Morone, the white slave panic offers a variation on a familiar American epic: innocents falling prey to sex monsters of one predatory sort or another. Witches, smut peddlers, black men, savage Indians, polygamous Mormons, Irish priests, queers, Internet providers, and any number of “others” have all taken their place in this rich cavalcade of threats. Get-tough measures? sometimes constitutional, sometimes not? are usually the ultimate solution. The patriarchal state moves in, and freedoms are lost in the name of safety and security. In the case of the white slave panic, nothing less than American civilization itself was thought to be at stake. When Congress acted, the Baptists cheered the victory. “Panics and witch-hunts are an American classic: nothing stirs the people or grows their government like a pulpit-thumping moral crusade against malevolent dastards.” (p. 3)

The political repercussions of the ongoing struggle between a redeeming “us” and a reforming “them” ripple throughout the generations. To read American political development as a series of reactions to moral crusades and the resulting social controls is to challenge conventional assumptions about U.S. government and politics. Consider the much-propounded notion that America has a small federal government. In terms of health-care delivery, this is an apt argument: the burden is placed on the private sector. But turning to moral controls, one finds an intrusive federal government, constantly expanding and investigating, regardless of which party is in power. It is difficult to suggest that a weak state would enter the 21st century with some three percent of its population in jail, in prison, on parole, or on probation. (p. 3)

In countless cases and in many ways, morality propels the American government to act. Changes in demographics, economics, and social or sexual trends are accompanied by fears of moral and cultural decline. The wind of modernity threatens traditional communities. Someone cries out, “Thou shalt not!” An institution, congressional committee, religious group, or

community board directs that anxiety toward a recognizable demon. If the target is new immigrants, they are often viewed as lazy or overly sexual, ready to corrupt the country. In other cases, a new group seeks to change the rules. Broadly defined political parameters invite various interests to participate, and they change the playing field. Some move in, while others are pushed out. Upward and downward social mobility invites status anxiety. Racial and gender politics are renegotiated. Such battles date back to 1636. "All those blurry lines between us and them, privileged and repressed, strong and weak, keep getting rewritten as the boundaries between good and evil." (pp. 3-4)

This moral impulse plays out in different ways in terms of the American policy-making process. With regard to social welfare policy and social movements, it creates a cultural backdrop against which actors can designate a worthy "us" and a dangerous "them." Given enough fuel, this moral fervor unleashes racial panics and witch-hunts, as purported moral inferiors? the witches, drinkers, slaves, and crack users? watch their rights being stripped away. To win back those inalienable rights, Morone contends that those facing oppression merely need to cry out that good people are facing injustice, and the process will reverse itself. (pp. 3-5) If only it were that easy. Unfortunately, he documents far more cases in which moral fervor has been used to deprive groups of their rights than cases in which rights are recovered with this argument.

Yet Morone is correct in suggesting that moral fervor cuts both ways. Certainly, moral impulses have propelled reform movements as well as moral panics. While the author emphasizes that Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the abolition movement were as much influenced by the Gospels as the Puritans, his work highlights the rich and devious contours of moral attack, while merely summarizing the social justice agenda. Dante is said to have given the best lines to the rascals in the deepest rings of his *Inferno*. Morone does much the same with American history. But perhaps that's the point. While communitarian and the liberal readings of American history fill the libraries, Morone highlights the hellfire alternative as a central narrative of American politics and culture. To this end, his reading of American history is convincing. "If moral fervor stirs our better angels, moral fever spurs our demons . . . The nation develops not from religious to secular but from revival to revival." (p. 3)

Competing notions of justice offer both constructive and destructive uses of righteousness in political discourse and action. Morone traces these threads from the colonial era through revolutions, civil wars, reform movements, and moral crusades, as opposing camps label each other devils, drinkers, and so on. On the one hand, moral conviction has played a central role in debates over abortion, abolition, voting rights, and suffrage. On the other, the same impulse was used to propel Prohibition. Yet to suggest that the moral impulse was behind the pro-slavery and abolition movements is tenuous at best. More importantly, Morone strives to illuminate the competing impulses behind the Gospel-based reform tradition and the Victorian propensity to ban that which was most fun. Take the temperance movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The driving force behind this movement was the desire to stop men from beating their wives and children. The result of this simple, reasonable impulse was both the promise of Progressive Era reforms and the danger of the Prohibition Era.

The rich contribution of Morone's work is his delineation of the dynamics of the moralist attack and his outline of the patterns of their presence over the years. "The registries of moral flaws fall into a distinct analytic pattern . . . each dangerous other threatened us with variations of the same four sins. Abolitionists pinned them on slaveholders, nativists on the Irish, and contemporary Jeremiahs on our own underclass." (p. 16) Un-American "others" are typically resented because they are viewed as lazy and condemned for maintaining habits that are different from the status quo. That was Cotton Mather's argument. Additionally, the "others" may drink alcohol or take drugs. From Prohibition to today's War on Drugs, this charge has spurred increased incarceration of these "others," helped support underground economies, and encouraged social and political violence in an effort to stem the continued supply of illegal and highly desired goods. Such are the ironies of struggles against the "other"? they often provide what the market economy demands. This in turn inspires resentment and calls for social controls, often of profitable markets. This leads to the third item in Monroe's outline. The "others" are also typically blamed for being involved with "violence." Even if the "others" are defending themselves against social or political attacks, charges of violence usually inspire further social controls and increased funding for police and prisons. (p. 16) "Panics pump up honest fears and project them onto entire groups. Suddenly, good people face a race of monsters. Cotton Mather's army of devils rises again." (p. 17)

Yet all the trouble related to the first three sins? laziness, drugs, and violence? pale in comparison to the fourth: sex. “Here lies the central moral theme and the most unsettling bundle of questions. For starters, sexuality challenges the fundamental Puritan precept: control thyself.” (p. 17) Mixed in with debates about gender, the politics of sex involves struggles over abortion, divorce, queerness, women’s rights, and much more. “When the larger political economy grows tumultuous, some Americans try to find order by asserting control over the ‘little commonwealth,’ the family and children.” (p. 17) Each generation worries about its youth, especially those considered delinquent and those from non-nuclear families. “Poor parenting bodes big trouble down the line. Finally, sex and marriage mark the intimate frontier between us and them.” (p. 17)

Responses to these sins tend to fall into solutions based on pledges (such as virginity until marriage or abstinence from drink), restrictions (such as curfews and limits on reproductive services), increased funding for police and prisons, and even more get-tough laws? all designed under the proverbial “Thou shalt not!”

In terms of social welfare policy, Morone’s reading of the use of sin as stigma is powerful and telling. For example, the author points out that many of the characteristics that made witches targets? laziness, unconventional ways, and failure to adhere to conventional family mores? have also dogged another group of stigmatized women, “welfare queens.” Morone describes the interrogation of Sarah Good during the Salem witch trials of 1692: “She is usually described as the perfect stereotype of a witch? a quarrelsome, pipe-smoking hag.” A more modern stereotype might fit even better: “welfare queen.” She had no fixed residence, was a beggar, was pregnant, and dragged her young daughter wherever she went. (p. 88) As with many “others,” the central crime committed by most of the women accused of being witches was one of sexual compulsivity. (p. 90)

For Morone, the “welfare queen” is one of countless ancient stigmas that run through contemporary narratives about public assistance, teen pregnancy, violence, and drug use. People are poor because of bad morals. From Salem onward, attempts to control moral inferiors played out again and again. It’s an old story, yet it continues to divide a righteous “us” from an immoral, predatory “them.” “The formula goes back long before the American Revolution. Project moral fears onto an entire group and do something to

*Benjamin Shepard*

control them . . . It is about the United States and how we divide our society into friends and enemies. At every historical turn we will find a racial oppression embedded in a moralizing frame.” (pp. 21-22) Which may help explain why, while the United States lags behind most other Western nations in terms of social welfare, it is an international leader in government control of its people.

***Benjamin Shepard*** is the coeditor/author of *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (Verso, 2002) and *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic* (Cassell, 1997). He is section editor/coauthor of "Social Purity Movements" in the *Encyclopedia of Social Movements* (ME Sharpe 2004).