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Puritans One and All?

Orthodox Calvinism, with its tragic insistence on human falleness, has always appeared as a jarringly strange doctrine in the history of a country whose cultural temperament, in later years, so often seemed to be dominated by a spirit of optimism and an ebullient faith in progress. Writing in 1911, the philosopher George Santayana wittily remarked, "How strange to the American now that saying of Jonathan Edwards, that men are naturally God's enemies! Yet that is an axiom to any intelligent Calvinist. . . . If you told the modern American that he is totally depraved, he would think you were joking, as he himself usually is."[1]

Yet, if the Calvinist doctrine of original sin rapidly lost its hold on the American religious imagination, it nevertheless remains an interesting question how Puritanism might have continued to influence American culture. Professor James Morone, in his new study, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History*, addresses himself to this issue, arguing that "after three and a half centuries—for better or worse—we remain Puritans all." The centrality of morality in American political life is the main subject of *Hellfire Nation*, particularly what Morone terms the "politics of sin," a form of moral discourse initiated by the Puritans and purveyed by their so-called neo-Puritan successors, such as the abolitionists, prohibitionists, and anticommunists of subsequent eras. The neo-Puritans are later challenged by a rival group of moral crusaders arriving in the early twentieth century who preach the Social Gospel. The persistence and power of moral crusades in American politics form one of the unifying themes of American history in Morone's view, and his goal in *Hellfire Nation* is therefore to recast "the American story as a moral tale."[2]

Morone's contention that American politics has always involved conflicts among competing systems of morality would at first glance seem to be a fairly obvious one, particularly in light of the disputa-

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tious history of American Christianity. Such an insight, however, is nevertheless one that he believes political scientists are apt to lose sight of, given what he sees as their tendency to focus on the more secular dimension of political activity. His argument that the evaluative "ought" is at least important as the factual "is" comes as a welcome reminder that morality, especially but not exclusively religious morality, has been a potent shaping force in the American past.

Morone begins his study, appropriately enough, with the Puritans, a group that he believes has long been slighted by political scientists. The Puritans, like most American moral crusaders, he contends, are motivated first and foremost by the questions "Who are we? Who belongs?"—questions that Morone often treats as distinctively American. The Puritans were thus engaged in a "restless quest for their own elusive identity," something that they "concocted" not so much from a set of theological premises, but by identifying a long list of Satanic "others," such as Indians, Quakers, and witches. They thereby established the paradigm according to which all subsequent moral disputes would be framed. The dominant group, motivated by a need to clarify, shape, and preserve its identity as well as its power, proceeds to stigmatize another group, which invariably results in its repression or outright proscription. Thus, Morone comfortably draws a series of parallels among widely separated historical moments, for example, the witch-hunts of the Puritan era and the anticommunist witch-hunts of the 1950s. By the time we arrive at his chapter on the sixties, he declares that "it's the same thing every time," which means, more or less, that race, class, and gender, and the concept of the "other"—the principal theoretical categories employed by Morone—can fully explain the bulk of moral conflict in American history.[3]

This is a large claim, and Morone has difficulty sustaining it not only in his treatment of the Puritans, but in numerous instances over the course of his five-hundred-page tome. It is by no means clear, for example, that the Puritans were motivated primarily by the question "Who are we?" Such an interpretation veers precipitously close to being psychologically reductive, as it rests, it would seem, on the highly questionable and rather ahistorical presupposition that the identity of the Puritans was somehow opaque. Morone's repeated insistence that "moral righteousness" helps "Americans figure out who they are," and his reference to a "moral urge" at work in political conflicts, merely reinforces the suspicion that he is operating with an oddly psychologized understanding of morality.[4]

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It also gives rise to a type of historical explanation that strains credulity. Morone devotes a great deal of attention, for instance, to the Puritans' often vicious treatment of Quakers, and to their proscription of the antinomian heresy. But did they do such things because they were wrestling with the issue of who they were? One suspects it was precisely because they knew who they were, what doctrines they believed in, and what their mission was that they attacked the Quakers, a rival sect that espoused a set of doctrines that were at odds with orthodox Calvinism.

As useful as the categories of race, class, and gender are in some contexts—and they are by no means out of place in a history of the politics of sin—in the case of *Hellfire Nation* they seem to have the effect of obviating the need to examine the substantive content of the moral debate at hand, and Morone glides, with his breezy, colloquial prose, from one subject to the next without lingering on knotty questions of theology or moral philosophy, or pausing for a close analysis of the beliefs of the figures marched across the pages of his work. Such an approach does, however, enable him to frame a large part of his narrative as an endlessly repeating series of Manichean conflicts, where the "sinful other" is proscribed by the righteous—or self-righteous—crusader. Hence, he is confident that McCarthyism and Puritan witch-hunts were manifestations of the same historical phenomena. But in order for such comparisons to be historically convincing, Morone would have to clarify what precisely he means by terms such as sin and morality, so that the reader might understand how the "neo-Puritans" inhabited a moral universe similar to that of their Puritan ancestors—a people whose theology stressed, it is perhaps worth noting, that all of humanity fell under the heading of a "sinful other."

A similar problem arises in his examination of the practitioners of the Social Gospel, who, unlike their neo-Puritan rivals, sought to transfer the locus of sin to environmental circumstance, for example, poverty, or blighted neighborhoods. Here too Morone declines to delve very deeply into the theology of the movement, and, after introducing Walter Rauschenbusch, one of its founders, he proceeds post haste to place the New Deal and the civil rights movement squarely within the tradition. One is therefore left wondering about the precise philosophical relationship uniting Rauschenbusch, the archetype of the liberal Protestant social reformer; the ethos of the New Deal, with its veneration of scientific technocracy; and Martin

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Luther King Jr., a Southern Baptist who was influenced by the neo-orthodox writings of Reinhold Niebuhr.

In the end, Morone's claim that we remain "Puritans all" seems to rest for the most part on the fact that Americans retain strong moral convictions. Those who want to know exactly what those moral convictions are, and how they have changed over time, will have to consult a different work.

Notes

1. George Santayana, "The Genteel Tradition," in Douglas L. Wilson, ed., *The Genteel Tradition: Nine Essays by George Santayana* (Lincoln, Neb., 1998), 41, 42–43.

2. James Morone, *Hellfire Nation: The Politics of Sin in American History* (New Haven, 2003), 497, 3.

3. Ibid., 9, 11, 54, 408.

4. Ibid., 32, 72.

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