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Whence the Bible Belt?: The South and Moral Reconstruction

Gaines M. Foster has written a book that is at once a history of reform movements, policy making, and state building, of religion, race, and regional change, and of the relationship between state coercion and personal liberty. Foster's considerable contribution is to connect reform movements and reformers—most of whom have been treated individually elsewhere, by other historians—to describe the development, by the 1890s, of a national organized Christian political lobby. Foster describes the transition from an antebellum moral polity that emphasized personal liberty and individualism to the realization that "moral suasion" could no longer operate alone in a new economic and social environment. New federal legislation "to ensure moral citizens and a moral environment was the most radical change to the moral polity that the lobbyists advocated" (p. 81). Central to this transition were white southerners, who under slavery had favored personal liberty and rejected a powerful state. By the 1890s, however, they embraced the power of the state to legislate some forms of morality. Foster has produced a solid piece of scholarship that places the South into national political and economic context and raises fruitful questions about, for example, southern religion and the South's relationship to the federal government and the rest of the nation in the Gilded Age and Progressive eras.

Many of these reforms (for example, Prohibition and the Mann Act) have long been considered part of progressivism. Foster, however, places them into a broader context and demonstrates that they had histories longer than the narrowly defined Progressive movement. Nor were Foster's subjects Social Gospel adherents, intent upon achieving social justice, economic reforms, and the creation of an earthly Kingdom of God. The goals of the Christian reform movement occasionally overlapped with the Progressive and Social Gospel movements, to be sure, but its focus was always personal righteousness and morality. Foster also separates moral reform from racial, class, or gender explanations and argues convincingly that those factors were only secondary to reform-
ers' Christian faith. He takes religion seriously, therefore, and on adherents' own terms.

In the immediate post-Civil War period, Congress preferred to work within clearly defined boundaries of constitutional authority and proved reluctant to overextend its reach. Even where Congress supported early moral reform, that legislation received support primarily for its scientific benefits and applied only to institutions under federal authority. For example, in 1886 the Women's Christian Temperance Union managed to get a temperance bill passed that emphasized the scientific evidence of alcohol's ill effects rather than its detrimental moral impact. That legislation applied only to schools under federal control, namely, military and naval academies and those for Native Americans and African Americans.

Passing legislation to control sexuality and, ostensibly, protect the family proved easier than dealing with the morality of alcohol consumption. The 1873 Comstock Law restricted the distribution of obscene material and information about sexuality through the mail. This was the first major victory in Christian lobbyists’ attempts to expand federal power. But even then, moral legislation followed certain patterns and only went so far. Congress found it easier to justify regulating commerce rather than morality per se. The Mann Act, which banned the transportation of women across state lines for immoral purposes, was initially intended to regulate prostitution as a commercial activity (although the Supreme Court later allowed it to be applied more broadly). In addition, regulating sexuality stopped short of federal legislation against polygamy. Congress did successfully pressure Utah (without federal legislation) to outlaw polygamy. But any legislation that regulated marriage and divorce, which many Christian reformers favored (but not all, since the lobby was divided over biblical interpretations of passages dealing with divorce), threatened to run afoul of southern antimiscegenation laws.

In the 1880s, the WCTU and the National Reform Association (whose goal was to "christianize the government" [p. 82]) entered into an informal alliance, and by the 1890s a permanent Christian lobby had formed in Washington, D.C. That lobby enjoyed broad popular support among Protestants and could mobilize church people to pressure congressional leaders to vote for certain pieces of legislation. For example, grassroots political pressure from Christians encouraged Congress to close the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago on Sunday. This proved to be only a partial victory, to be sure, since lobbyists actually had sought a national Sunday law. The failure to gain a Sunday law, according to Foster, “and Congress's rejection of the Christian amendment, for the third time, had revealed how few in Washington accepted the government's responsibility to God or even responded to an appeal solely to divine law” (p. 117).

With the development of a national Christian lobby came the increasing willingness of congressmen–especially southerners–to support moral legislation. Reformers continued to meet predictable resistance, but Congress gradually extended its reach, especially over interstate commerce. Christian lobbyists still failed to muster support for a national Sunday law, although Congress did agree to end Sunday mail delivery in all first- and second-class post offices in towns and cities. And it passed divorce laws that applied only to the territories and the District of Columbia. Moreover, by 1912 anti-liquor activists, led now by the Anti-Saloon League, had successfully aligned the government against alcohol with the Webb-Kenyon Act, which gave the federal government the authority to end the interstate shipment of alcohol. The next logical step was national Prohibition, “the crowning achievement of moral reconstruction” (p. 221). Reformers achieved that landmark legislation, however, by continuing to concentrate on commerce and not liquor as a vice, a pragmatic strategy that reflected the con-
tinuing tension between moral legislation and personal liberty.

Foster argues that southerners' embrace of federal power occurred, perhaps not surprisingly, primarily because of the politics of race. Southern Congressmen grew more comfortable with using the power of the state to control black behavior. Laws aimed at controlling immoral conduct generally associated with blacks—drinking, gambling, obscenity—were acceptable, but any law that could be used to undermine Jim Crow was not. And white southerners were keenly aware of the distinctions. For instance, they supported a ban on the interstate transport of prizefighting films, so as to limit the distribution of films of the dominating and defiant black boxer Jack Johnson. But they opposed federal censorship of the movie industry because of the popularity of Birth of a Nation. There was an ambivalence behind the politics of race that continued to complicate the South's relationship to the rest of the nation. To be fair, Foster did not set out to write a book about the nature of southern whiteness, but he could have considered this racial argument further. Indeed, it was no coincidence that this was the same period when white southerners constructed, in Grace Elizabeth Hale's words, "the culture of segregation" in response to a rising black middle class and the South's incorporation into the national economy.[1]

Foster presents this multifaceted subject with a careful attention to nuance and ambivalence. Through exhaustive research into congressional voting records, petitions to Congress, temperance society records, and individual state archives, among other sources, Foster marshals an impressive array of evidence to support his argument about the growth of a national Christian lobby and to demonstrate that southern congressmen and senators became important allies of that lobby. Southerners increasingly petitioned Congress to pass at least temperance legislation, and data in two appendices demonstrate that southern congressmen responded to constituent appeals by introducing temperance, gambling, and obscenity legislation. But in light of earlier studies of southern progressivism, it is possible to question the extent to which white southerners supported this general reform spirit—or at least the extent to which they supported using the government to achieve those ends. A decade ago, for example, historian William A. Link described the resistance of poor, rural whites to heavy-handed reform during roughly the same period.[2] Perhaps the transition Foster argues for was not complete; indeed, transitions of that sort rarely are. But Foster could have sorted this tension out a bit more.

Missing from this book are southern church people, many of whom were comfortable with the South's transition from defender of personal liberty to advocate of moral legislation. Indeed, in his recent re-evaluation of the 1925 Scopes Trial, Edward J. Larsen made the tension between majority rule (as evidenced through anti-evolution legislation) and civil liberties a central theme, with southern Protestants at ease using the power of the state to impose their will.[3] This again is another book that Foster did not intend to write, but Moral Reconstruction raises questions about the South's relationship to the rest of the nation and should become a useful starting point for the study of an interesting phenomenon, the movement of the Bible Belt from New England (under the influence of first the Puritans and then nineteenth-century abolitionists and reformers) to the South. The South's reputation as the nation's center of moral and religious activism emerged during this period, especially as Protestant fundamentalism took hold of southern churches. The Bible Belt had arrived, and only a study of southern religion that includes the South's relationship to the rest of the nation can explain that development further. By integrating southern history into a national framework, Foster has produced both a model and a foundation for that later work.

Notes


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