

Hellfire  
Nation

THE POLITICS OF SIN  
IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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**JAMES A. MORONE**

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# Introduction

## A Nation with the Soul of a Church

TEN thousand people filled the Holt Street Baptist Church and spilled out into the Montgomery evening. The young minister, Martin Luther King, Jr., slowly worked his way through the crowd. When he finally reached the pulpit and began to preach, loudspeakers carried his message to the black men and women standing outside. King called on them to rise in protest. "There comes a time," he roared over shouts and amens, "when the people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." Then he pointed down a celebrated path. "I want it to be known throughout . . . this nation that we are a Christian people. The only weapon in our hand is the weapon of protest." King capped the first great sermon of the civil rights era with one of his favorite quotations. "We are determined, here in Montgomery, to work and fight until justice runs down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream." King took the passage from the Old Testament's Book of Amos, which is harsher than the preacher let on. "Woe unto you," warns Amos in a passage King never touched, "wailing shall be in all the streets." Why? Because you turned your back on Joseph when he was sold into bondage by his brothers.

The civil rights movement poured out of Holt Street Baptist on that December night in 1955. The activists put aside a traditional black jeremiad about God's wrath toward those who oppressed His children. Instead, they latched onto Christian nonviolence and, in the next decade, transformed the United States. So did the implacable segregationists who stormed back at the marchers with their own twisted moral arguments. Both sides called on God to witness the cause. Today Americans honor King and skip over the segregationist violence, the great shame of the 1960s. The civil rights crusade embodied an ancient political tradition: across American time, nothing rallies the

people or expands their government like a pulpit-thumping crusade against social injustice.

Panic spread across the nation. Dangerous young men prowled the countryside. They lured girls into ice cream parlors, wooed them, whisked them off to the cities, and sold them into sexual slavery. By 1910, experts reported, sixty thousand women a year were perishing in the brothels. Heartbreaking screams for help echoed, unanswered, in the urban night. Popular tracts warned young women away from Italian fruit stands, Chinese laundries, German skating rinks, and—most dangerous of all—the Eastern European Jews who had masterminded the sordid business. President William Howard Taft demanded action against the traffic in stolen girls. Congress normally left law enforcement to the states, but how could it ignore white slavery? Taking a woman across state lines for immoral purposes became a federal crime in 1910, and enforcement fell to the tiny Bureau of Investigation. The agency expanded, opened a branch office, and eventually changed its name to the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

When the moral champions finally marched into the sex districts, the enslaved maidens laughed at them. There were no iron bars on the brothels, no Jews skulking behind the doors, no sixty thousand perishing country girls. Still, the panic—and the call for federal action—sprang from real anxiety. The next census would certify the United States as an urban nation, and the rising cities frightened decent rural folks. Political machines prospered. Vice boomed. Cities filled with foreigners who changed American habits, changed America itself. Popular anxiety turned social and economic change into moral crises, fingered a villain, and called the cops. Fearful Americans did not have to make much of a leap to turn their qualms into 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. And even if the foreigners—Jews, Chinese, Italians—were not exactly stealing American girls, they were bringing strange ways to the United States. They seemed to threaten hardy Anglo-Saxon virtues. Even the label “white slavery” emits a racial jolt.

The white slave episode offers a variation on an American epic: our innocents fall into demonic hands. Savage Indians, satanic witches, Irish priests, Mormon polygamists, slave traders, saloon keepers, smut peddlers, drug pushers, Internet providers, and generations of black men would all take their turn as a menace to the nation’s innocent white women or children.

Even phantom fears provoke real political action. Leaders rallied Americans to defend their civilization from the foreign white slavers and their bestial practices. Congress responded with legislation. The annual Baptist convention cheered the law and pushed the administration to expand its moral mission (fu-

ture social scientists would have said that the Baptists captured the policy). Even without stolen farm girls, enforcement agencies like the FBI found plenty of villains to nab. 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.

A new nation, drawn from many tribes and races, always faces the primal question, Who are we? In this book I trace an all-American answer back to the Puritans: a godly people, a model for the world, a city on a hill. Moral dreams define the nation's ideals; they inspire crusades at home and abroad—from the revolution of 1776 to the war on terror more than two centuries later.

If moral fervor stirs our better angels, moral fever spurs our demons. Frightening changes—a new economy, booming cities, still more strangers—rouse fears of decline. Every generation blames a slack-virtued, un-American “them.” At every turn another Jew or Chinese man steals (we used to say “shanghai”) our daughters or corrupts our land. Efforts to convert or control the dangerous “them” snap across the culture and remake the regime.

*Hellfire Nation* presents the American story as a moral tale. Political life constantly gets entangled in two vital urges—redeeming “us” and reforming “them.” The moral perspective revises all kinds of standard stories. From this angle, the United States is a lot more than a nation of shopkeepers. Take, for example, that old political science favorite: the United States operates a weak state, almost no state at all. True enough if you're looking for national health insurance. But turn to moral control and you'll find a powerful government pushing deep into American society. What kind of weak state would outlaw liquor sales from coast to coast? What kind of weak state enters the twenty-first century with 3 percent of its population in jail or prison, on parole, or under probation? Only a powerful and intrusive regime could get that many people under its criminal justice thumb.

Why do morals play such a crucial role? For starters, Americans believe in God. In other nations, a handful of stable faiths claim a fixed social place; in the United States, religions restlessly shift, split, and spread in a kind of ecclesiastical uproar. The nation develops not from religious to secular but from revival to revival. The moral fervor mixes with the American social chaos: new people keep arriving, and each new immigration stirs fears of moral decline. Wide-open political rules invite some into the political fray and push others out. Economic mobility—down as well as up—generates plenty of status anxiety. Race relations constantly get renegotiated. Ditto gender—that battle began in 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. The

recipe for discrimination is simple: paint them bad. We strip moral inferiors—witches, slaves, drinkers, crackheads—of their rights. To win back those rights, simply reverse the process: cry out that good people face injustice.

Morality operates in different ways. Sometimes it simply reflects displaced anxiety. A gust of modernity—a changing economy or a new technology—threatens traditional communities. Our institutions—a synod of ministers, a congressional committee, religion, law—channel the fear toward a familiar demon. At other times, a moral idea catches on. The ideas themselves matter—they rouse mass movements, raise new political possibilities, reverberate against powerful organizations, and rattle the status quo. We will see both kinds of moral outburst. Each transforms the American way.

The moral cacophony filters into every nook and cranny of our common lives. It sounds so familiar that Americans often fail to hear it. But foreign visitors notice as soon as they step ashore. “Religion never intervenes directly in the government of American society,” wrote Alexis de Tocqueville in 1835, but it “should be considered the first of their political institutions. . . . Christianity reigns, without any obstacles, the universal faith.” A century later, G. K. Chesterton arrived from England with a more acid pen. The Americans have the queer idea, wrote Chesterton, that almost everything involves virtue. One afternoon he politely offered a cigar to a reporter who had come to interview him; to Chesterton’s wonder, the man stiffened and coldly declined. “He could not have conveyed more clearly that I had attempted to corrupt an honourable man.” It was as though, Chesterton went on, I had been “offering him the hashish that would turn him into an assassin.” Later, Chesterton offered another interviewer a smoke. The second reporter slyly looked about to make sure they were alone. Then, snatching the proffered cigar, the newsman hissed apologetically, “Well, Mr. Chesterton, I’m afraid I have the habit.” Chesterton could not imagine, he wrote, how these people had managed to convert his cigars into instruments of vice and virtue. He famously summed up the United States as a nation with the soul of a church. Decades later, Gunnar Myrdal arrived from Sweden to study American race relations and promptly tagged the United States the most “moralistic and moral conscious . . . branch of Western Civilization.” In contrast to Chesterton, Myrdal cheered. American moralism, he wrote, crowned the “glory of the nation” and might even prove the “salvation of mankind.”<sup>1</sup>

In this book I explore the moral urge at the heart of American politics and society. In a nation made by immigrants, marked by social mobility, and home to a thousand religions, morality is dynamite. Visions of vice and virtue define the American community. They designate the worthy “us” (jammed into a

Montgomery church) and finger the dangerous “them” (running brothels in the wicked cities). Moral fevers unleash our witch-hunts and racial panics. They inspire the dreamers who turn the nation upside-down in the name of social justice.

## American Stories

The standard portrait of American government—political theorists call it liberalism—has little to do with morals. As James Madison put it, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.” The founders drafted a government that would require virtue from neither rulers nor citizens. Raw self-interest did not have to be suppressed because it could be harnessed. The celebrated system of checks and balances would use my ambition to counter yours. Men and women could chase their own selfish interests—flunking the classic test of virtue—and still produce perfectly good government. When Alexander Hamilton was asked why the Constitution did not even mention God he is said to have replied sarcastically, “We forgot.” Today, Americans do not pray in public schools and can barely manage Christmas decorations on the courthouse lawn.<sup>2</sup>

The rival American story pictures a kind of Rotarian nation, a people primed to sign up for any communal effort. The community impulse can look either bright (town meetings, bowling leagues, Bible study groups) or bleak (the Ku Klux Klan, militia groups).

Let’s look at these two classics—the liberal and the communitarian—before introducing a hellfire alternative. Each perspective tells us important things about who we are. But while the traditional stories fill our libraries, the American moral epic has been pushed to the side—sometimes analyzed (often masterfully) but rarely explored as a mainspring of American politics and culture.

### *Liberalism*

Liberalism comes with its own Genesis: in the beginning, Americans sailed away from old world tyranny and settled a vast, unpopulated land—the place almost thrust freedom on them. The settlers did not need to push aside barons or bishops to get ahead. Instead, as Tocqueville put it, “Americans were born equal instead of becoming so.” Men (and maybe women; the old myth gets a bit shaky here) faced extraordinary opportunities. The land and its riches awaited—all it took was a little capital and a lot of work.

Unabashed individualism became the irresistible consequence. Free to

make their own fortunes amid the new world bounty, Americans developed their celebrated faith—you might even call it a cult: free economic markets, limited government, and a firm commitment to individual rights. The Constitution nailed “Don’t tread on me” to the mast of a pragmatic, secular regime that Americans now hawk in every corner of the globe.<sup>3</sup>

The theory behind all this, classical liberalism, emerged from Europe’s terrible religious wars. Weary of the bloodshed, liberal theorists urged governments to turn a blind eye to people’s personal views. Theorists use the term “liberal” to mean something quite different from its ordinary meaning. At the heart of the theory stands an inviolate line between private and public realms. Pick your own values; your private sphere is protected by rights that bar any public authority from meddling in what you think or say. “However strange it may seem,” wrote John Locke in 1689, “the lawgiver hath nothing to do with moral virtues and vices.” Citizens draw on their private desires or values and then charge into the public, the political, realm to advance their interests. In the patois of economics, every agent maximizes her own utilities.<sup>4</sup>

Liberalism’s great American debate turns on precisely where to draw the line between public and private spheres. Americans are famous for their pinched public sector; just protect the basic rights, they say, especially property, and leave people alone to compete in free economic markets—free, that is, from government meddling. Sure enough, many Americans greet new public programs by storming against socialism and grumbling about taxes. In this world view, your ideas, your property, and, oddly, your firearms sit securely in the private sphere.

Occasionally, Americans get carried away. After the Civil War, for example, President Andrew Johnson illustrated how harsh a raw market view could get when he mused about mass black annihilation: if the former slaves “fail and perish away, let us be careful that the failure shall not be attributable to any denial of justice.” But hold on. It was 1865. The freemen had no property, no capital, little education, and few rights. They could not vote or, in many cases, move about freely. They lived with the threat of violence and the scars of slavery. It is hard to imagine a more deeply biased political economy. Yet here was the president coolly informing America that the former slaves would swim or sink alongside everyone else (while he vetoed laws that might have given them a decent chance to swim). President Johnson had gone too far in drawing his limits on the public sector. He overlooked the need for a government that protects the basics—the right to vote, to speak, to move around safely—before people start competing in private sector markets. He also offers an extreme reminder that every system is tilted by its political rules and institutions.<sup>5</sup>