

## BOOK REVIEW

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*God Hates: Westboro Baptist Church, American Nationalism, and the Religious Right.* By Rebecca Barrett-Fox. Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2016; pp. i+296. \$24.95 cloth.

Rebecca Barrett-Fox's *God Hates: Westboro Baptist Church, American Nationalism, and the Religious Right* opens with a story. During one of the countless 2012 Republican presidential primary debates, an openly gay soldier named Stephen Hill asked candidate Rick Santorum—from Iraq, via video—whether he supported a reinstatement of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT). The response, Barrett-Fox notes, was revealing. "Not only did Santorum restate the right wing's unsubstantiated position that allowing openly gay men and women to serve would undermine the effectiveness of the military, but neither he nor any of the other contenders thanked Hill for his service, a convention at such events—nor did any of the debate participants rebuke the audience members who booed Hill" (1). The moral of this story—or, at least, one of them—is that, for the Religious Right, anti-gay vitriol remains a potent political force strong enough to topple even the most sacred pillars of civil religion.

Although much of the book is concerned with the internal culture of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), the broader themes of American nationalism and Religious Right political rhetoric always run just beneath the surface. Recognized nationwide for their provocative website—[godhatesfags.com](http://godhatesfags.com)—and their incendiary practice of picketing military funerals, the congregants of WBC are almost universally reviled. They are condemned by progressives and centrists, of course, but they are also fiercely disowned by even the most conservative of fundamentalist clergy, including the Jerry Falwells and Pat Robertsons of the world—men whose views on same-sex relationships seem remarkably consonant with those of WBC founder Fred Phelps. For Barrett-Fox, this odd unanimity of opinion raises an interesting question: Given the pronounced anti-gay sentiments of

the Religious Right as a whole, on what grounds do they distinguish themselves from the bigotry of the WBC?

The answer to this question is part theological and part rhetorical. Theologically, the WBC identifies as a Primitive—also known as “Hard Shell” or “Old School”—Baptist Church, a denominational subset that traces its succession directly to Jesus himself, and whose members therefore “see themselves as the authentic church of Christ, as organized by his apostles and settled in the United States by God’s providence” (49). A strongly Calvinist denomination, the Primitive Baptists are known for a staunch commitment to principle that separates them even from other conservative Baptist churches—and, it should be noted, even they do not officially recognize the WBC. This ultra-separation results in both an extremely specific set of doctrines and a fierce will to defend them. If other conservative churches generally embrace a “love the sinner, hate the sin” line in reference to homosexuality, for instance, the WBC’s theology privileges hate as a matter of election. Or, as Barrett-Fox puts it, “Westboro Baptist Church does not preach that God hates people because they are gay but rather . . . that they are gay because God hates them” (73). Their intent is not to save the souls of gay individuals—the doctrine of predestination makes this impossible—but rather to speak God’s truth to the already condemned. This view, while in some ways similar to those popular on the Religious Right, is too idiosyncratic to fit neatly among them.

Rhetorically, because the WBC addresses the nation in such an extreme prophetic tone, it repulses citizens who might otherwise be interested in some form of coalition. Religious Right organizations work to balance hardline views with a big tent philosophy and polished media, meaning that any alliance with the WBC or its ilk would prove politically toxic. This is especially true in light of the church’s stance toward the military. Like many Religious Right figures, the WBC often interprets current events according to its theology and cites certain catastrophes as evidence of God’s avenging hand. But unlike the Religious Right, the WBC frequently points an accusatory finger at the most sacred symbols of American identity. Since 2003, its members have picketed hundreds of military funerals, attributing soldiers’ deaths to God’s punishment of American sin. Fred Phelps put it this way:

You can't hardly imagine a more fitting way to severely punish a people than to begin to blow the cream of their young manhood and womanhood to smithereens in Iraq, and the forum, the venue to preach that, is the funeral of some solider, some young American soldier who's been blown to smithereens by an IED. It's as though the Lord God said, "You raised him for the devil and hell [and] I'm giving him back to you in a bodybag." (145).

Barrett-Fox argues that, of all the extremity projected by the WBC, the practice of celebrating military funerals cuts the sharpest contrast with—and best explains the disavowal of—the Religious Right. Although both groups may embrace prophetic appeals and condemnation, only one is comfortable directing these at soldiers and the flag. This was especially true during the decade before the repeal of DADT in 2011, a period marked by the “Christianization” of the military and the idealization of the straight, white, citizen-solider. The military had long been a sacred institution to conservative Christians, who lauded President Bush’s decision to sign the “Respect for America’s Fallen Heroes Act” in 2006. This legislation limited the WBC’s right to protest at military funerals but did not extend any such protection to the gay citizens they had been targeting for years (162). In 2012, when the Republican debate audience booed Stephen Hill, they appeared to hold his sexuality in violation of his service.

All of this is to say that Rebecca Barrett-Fox has written a book that will leave rhetorical scholars with plenty to consider, especially where free speech, protest, religious-political speech, and LGBT issues are concerned. For this reader, it has been especially interesting to reflect on how extremist voices influence the rhetoric of their more moderate peers, and the extent to which extremism and moderation may dissolve into shared policy goals.

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