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Review: 'God Hates: Westboro Baptist Church, American Nationalism, and the Religious Right'

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God Hates: Westboro Baptist Church, American Nationalism, and the Religious Right. By Rebecca Barrett-Fox. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016. x, 254 pp., \$24.95, ISBN 9780700622658.)

America is Doomed. God Hates Obama. Fags Doom Nations. Thank God for Dead Soldiers. All these are signs held up at military funerals by members of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas. In *God Hates* sociologist Rebecca Barrett-Fox gives us the first full-scale examination of Westboro, and it makes for fascinating and horrifying reading. She begins her study with an ethnography of the church, including a biography of founding pastor Fred Phelps, that makes use of interviews with church members to delineate Westboro's hyper-Calvinist theology and its understanding of the connection between individual sin (particularly, homosexuality) and national tragedy (particularly, the death of soldiers), a point that the church seeks to bring home with its picketing.

In the final chapters the author places Westboro in the context of the Religious Right. In this regard the one significant weakness of *God Hates* is the author's surprising failure to make use of the wealth of outstanding scholarship on evangelicalism and fundamentalism that has emerged over the past three decades. Not only would the book be much stronger if it had been placed into conversation with this literature, but familiarity with this scholarship might have alerted the author to the fact that Calvinism is enjoying a remarkable resurgence among American evangelicals, thus belying the author's claim that Westboro's Calvinism makes the church "an anachronism . . . on the American religious landscape" (66) and "offensive to the evangelicals who often otherwise share with Westboro Baptist Church condemnation of homosexuality" (95).

God Hates nevertheless makes an important contribution to our understanding of antigay politics. Barrett-Fox insightfully observes that the Religious Right makes great use of Westboro as a foil, characterizing the latter's activities as hateful while presenting its own "hate the sin, love the sinner" response as moderate, even compassionate. But the Religious Right's effort to burnish its own respectability cannot hide its similarities with Westboro: both stridently oppose gay rights, both believe gay people who do not repent are damned to hell, and both "share the claim that God will stop blessing (or is destroying) America for its sexual sins" (138).

Their only difference comes down to tactics, i.e., Westboro's picketing at military funerals. Barrett-Fox argues that, for the Religious Right, the "Christian, heteronormative war hero" is a sacred figure who heroically serves God's chosen nation, which is why "pickets of the funerals of the war dead are so offensive . . . to conservative religious believers, who value straightness and Christianity so highly" (162). Underscoring her argument, the author notes that the Religious Right's American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) filed a legal brief in behalf of Westboro's plans to picket at Matthew Shepard's funeral . . . but when Missouri sought to keep Westboro from picketing at military funerals, the ACLJ reversed course and supported the state: "What had changed? Only the presumed sexuality of the deceased and his identity as a soldier" (163).

God Hates is a disturbing book, more for what it says about the Religious Right than for what it says about Westboro Baptist. It is worth reading.

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