
In Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance, Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini challenge the manner in which religion, sex, and tolerance intertwine on the American cultural landscape. The authors trouble popular notions of a nation defined by tolerance and diversity, particularly as these concepts relate to the experiences of homosexual Americans. By demonstrating how homosexuality is almost always viewed in contrast with a somewhat fictitious and heteronormative American “mainstream,” Jakobsen and Pellegrini maintain that religious tolerance rhetoric is often little more than an invocation of Protestant Christian morality, and that true religious freedom is something that America has yet to realize.

Reaching this conclusion begins with the observation that the American legal system often uses the religious to regulate the sexual. The state’s interest in regulating sexual activity involves a rather simple equation, they note: by controlling sexual relationships, the state maintains control over its most basic social institutions, such as the family. Not only is sex seen as the ultimate measure of American morality, but within the American context, religion and morality are conflated. Protestantism is so ingrained in the American psyche that it is merely accepted as the norm. Morality talk, of which sex comprises a significant part, is thus inevitably a Protestant undertaking.

As such, Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue that tolerance rhetorics are often nothing more than discourses that support a liberal Protestant platform, thereby reinforcing the hierarchies and discriminatory worldviews that these very rhetorics claim they will reverse. The authors are careful to juxtapose “tolerance” and “freedom” as contradictory conceptual frameworks; one reinforces hierarchy and artificial social dualisms (as when one creates such an opposition by asking how “America” will tolerate “gays”), while the other celebrates diversities in all their forms.

One of the most refreshing approaches adopted by this book is its recognition that the liberal Protestant voice of tolerance represents just as much of a threat to religious freedom as conservative Protestantism (a point argued vocally by a number of others in the academy, as of late). Those who object to talk of liberatory ethics in a religious studies classroom will want to steer clear of the final chapters, which are overtly normative.

An extremely readable and interesting text, Love the Sin would be an excellent choice for the graduate classroom; some knowledge of gender/sexuality/women’s studies issues is assumed. One point that warrants further discussion is the authors’ link between the psycho-structural side of sex and the state — that is, their statement that sex receives regulation because it is the seat of social control. If sex is seen as the ultimate measure of morality, and if this belief can be linked back to concepts of sex as both highly powerful and highly dangerous (and thus in need of regulation), it seems reasonable to request that the authors spend more time considering why Americans have these beliefs about sex in the first place.

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