Joseph L. Locke  

*Making the Bible Belt* is a well constructed historical analysis that unpacks how post-Civil War Texas was a microcosm of the American South in the establishment of the “Bible Belt” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The “Bible Belt”, Locke suggests, can be seen forming through the raucous fight to pass state and federal amendments outlawing the manufacturing and sale of alcohol in the state of Texas.

Locke posits two camps in the prohibition debate. First, Locke says that “anticlericalism”, a cultural element within post-Civil War Texas, wished to limit the public “interference or influence of clergy in secular affairs” (5). In short, anticlericalism wished to silence the conservative religious voice in areas of politics and social issues. Second, Locke says that the “clerical” movement was an impassioned group of religious leaders that moved their influence from the pulpit into the public sphere, with the intent on reforming culture by using an apocalyptic urgency in order to ultimately establish a Christian nation based upon their predetermined codes of morality. The vehicle that clericalism used in order to fight its cause and eventually set a trajectory for further political engagement that would recruit subsequent generations into social politics, was the “prohibition” crusade.

In the late nineteenth century, anticlericalism was a much more powerful force, stalling the clerical movement from advancing it’s prohibition cause. However, Locke does a fantastic job detailing in a linear fashion, the ways that the clerical movement fought for a voice in social matters, specifically relating to prohibition. While prohibition eventually gets overturned, the establishment of the “Bible Belt” during the prohibition debate, set in motion a socially conservative political element in the southern United States that continues to be intimately engaged in voicing their deeply held convictions as it relates to morality and justice.

In order to spurn social action, Locke shows how the clerical movement used the apocalyptic “language of crisis” (63), the re-emergence of a Christian vision for the country from large urban pulpits, the production of ideological materials from denominational editorial boards, the growth of clerical students from Christian universities, the continued marginalization of minorities through critical labeling, and by employing voting restrictions with the intent on removing “much of their political resistance” (151). In so doing, the clerical movement was an intentional and fervent effort to tear down the barriers of church and state in order to enact an imaginative vision for the country that
could be facilitated through the political structure of judges, amendments and local and national voting procedures.

For those interested in one of the ways that culture and theology are in constant conversation with one another, *Making the Bible Belt* is a great book for such a study. Locke does well to show how the conservative southern church reacted with apocalyptic thought and imagination when confronted with social practices that they deemed immoral and the subsequent strategic efforts to superimpose their value system. While the topic presented in the text was specifically related to prohibition, one can substitute “prohibition” with any contemporary social issue and see the pattern of rhetoric, fighting and struggle for power that liberal and conservative Christian communities so ardently strive for.

One of the shortcomings of the book is the dualistic way that Locke posits all convictions and responses to social issues and ecclesial involvement in them. Locke presumes that there are only binary approaches to the struggle for prohibition, those that are either for it, or against it. Nowhere does Locke discuss alternative views or minority opinions that were present in the battle. Also, Locke proposes that there were only two voices in the social and ecclesiastical struggle for prohibition, the clerical and anticlerical. It appears, according to Locke’s presentation of his research, that there were those that wished for the pulpit to remain silent on social issues and those that wished to bridge the culture gap between the church and state by building an alliance determined by conservative Christian morality. Nowhere does Locke suggest that there were diverging voices that were a part of the social conversation. Furthermore, Locke attempts the same methodology when addressing how the clerical movement approached the Black population in an effort to gain their support for prohibition. He says that there were two camps among the Blacks—those that were for prohibition and those that were against prohibition. The Black population that was for prohibition, the White clerical community considered them to be of the “best sort” and those that were against prohibition were labeled as the “worst sort” of Blacks in the debate (140).

If the reader is looking for an explanation from either the clerical or anticlerical movement as to their approaches to social issues from a biblical or theological perspective, the text is all but moot in that regard. The reader must assume that the clerical and anticlerical elements were operating from preconceived notions of righteousness, theological orthodoxy, and denominational convictions in shaping cultural morality.

In a contemporary Western context where provocative issues such as the legalization of marijuana, prescription drug usage, Black-White relations, police violence, and the continued debate surrounding same-sex marriage and