

## THE BIBLE BELT – WHERE JESUS IS MORE OF A HOOD ORNAMENT THAN A DEITY



By Dennis Martin Altman, author of *The First Liberal*

In 1994 I left my home turf in the media centers of New York, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., to join the faculty of the University of Kentucky in Lexington.

I knew what everyone knows about the people of the Bible Belt; that the people were mostly poor and rural, and for the last 40 years, they've been voting for any candidate who invoked religion more than three times in any given speech. And, being a naïve Northern Atheist, I simply assumed that they voted as they did because they really were religious. What I hadn't realized, was that these people were so whipped and warped by their religion addiction that they had mashed it into something that even Jesus Christ couldn't recognize.

James Baldwin once said that African Americans took White America's religion and made it into something that *they* never could. I now know that he was talking about more than gospel music.

Religion, or what they call religion, is the keel of the South's identity. When people meet in other areas of the country, they first ask where they live and who they know, and maybe what they do for a living. In the BB, the "What church?" question comes first.

### **A universe without gravity**

BBers are steady churchgoers. The church and fellow congregants comprise their whole social atmosphere. Their membership and participation in church activities are their credentials, and they wear them proudly. They love the belongingness of it. They feel tingles of delight when they see signs like the recent billboard campaign that was supposedly made of messages from on high. On one of them, in white words against a black background, it said: "Don't make me come down there!" And it was signed...."God". They love that stuff, because it makes them feel that they're in a grand and glorious club. The image of their deity is that of a good ole' boy who's just another member of the club.

In the BB, church membership is a validation of status, and they declare it in every possible way. They use religious expressions in their conversations, and they advertise their commitment via song, jewelry, holiday celebrations, tattoos, and bumper stickers. If Christianity had a secret handshake, they'd use it all the time. But

while the church is their universe, they certainly don't feel the pull of its gravity. If one were to take the "quotes" attributed to Jesus in the Bible, he'd see that the folks of the Belt live in absolute denial of it all.

The Belt leads the nation in divorce and murder,<sup>1</sup> two offenses on which Jesus was particularly outspoken. Accordingly, it's no surprise that they rack up the worst numbers in the country in teenage pregnancies, STD/HIV/AIDS, and infant mortality.

But when well-meaning public health officials show them that communities that expand sex education in public schools have successfully reduced their levels of teen pregnancies, those officials are well advised to bring their resumes up to date. They have no future in BB-land. Ditto for any advice they have that involves condoms. And ditto for being serious about evolution, affirmative action, the Big Bang, peace demonstrations, clean needles, and anything the ACLU wants, anywhere.

**In sum, the people of the Bible Belt are deeply religious Christians (just ask them), but they treat Jesus more as a hood ornament than a deity.**

And those people are severely disadvantaged in other ways as well. The Belt lags behind the rest of the states in every aspect of education, health care, income and most other measures of achievement. Looking at Kentucky alone, the state ranks a poor forty-seventh among the states in percentage of residents with bachelor's degrees, and it's rated thirty-fifth in the proprietary "smartest state" index created by author Morgan Quitno.<sup>2</sup> In terms of per capita income, Kentucky ranks forty-fifth among the fifty states.<sup>3</sup>

Kentucky only gets near the top in listings of negative factors. It's eighth in diabetes, fourth in cancer deaths, and seventh in deaths from heart disease, stroke, and other cardiovascular conditions.<sup>4</sup> These lamentable numbers have been tabbed as the "Kentucky Uglies" by observers, and they provide the backdrop to the most severe of the commonwealth's contradictions.

However, while Kentuckians are statistically underpaid, unhealthy, and undereducated, they tend to vote as if they were rich, strong, and well prepared for any professions they might care to pursue.

The voting pattern holds true for the rest of the Bible Belt as well. They all rank unfavorably among the fifty states in terms of income, health, and education. However, they continually vote to keep things just the

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<sup>1</sup> Divorce: The Associated Press computed divorce statistics from data supplied by the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Health. The data showed that the highest divorce rates were found in the Bible Belt. "Tennessee, Arkansas, Alabama and Oklahoma round out the top five in frequency of divorce...the divorce rates in these conservative states are roughly 50 percent above the national average" of 4.2/1000 people. Eleven southern states (Alabama, Arkansas, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, North Carolina, New Mexico, Oklahoma, South Carolina, and Texas averaged 5.1/1000 people. (LA data is not available; TX data is for 1997.) Nine states in the Northeast (Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Vermont) averaged only 3.5/1000 people.

Murder: FBI Uniform Crime Statistics for 2005 (published September 2006)  
Regional Murder Rates per 100,000 People

Region	2005	2004	2003	2002	2001	Executions since 1976
South	6.6	6.6	6.9	6.8	6.7	856
West	5.8	5.7	5.7	5.7	5.5	66
Midwest	4.9	4.7	4.9	5.1	5.3	121
Northeast	4.4	4.2	4.2	4.1	4.2	4

<sup>2</sup> *Education State Rankings 2006-2007*, [www.morganquitno.com/booksinfoED.html](http://www.morganquitno.com/booksinfoED.html).

<sup>3</sup> *Kentucky Association for Economic Development*, [www.kaedonline.org](http://www.kaedonline.org).

<sup>4</sup> *Kentucky School of Public Health report, 2006*.

way they are. Illogical as it may seem, the BB regularly elects Conservative politicians who short-change them in terms of their greatest needs. What's wrong with this picture?

Are they politically naive? Do they hold a distorted view of how government works? Are they unaware of the achievements of Liberal programs which improved health, education, and prospects for employment for other poor, rural Americans? Have they been blindsided by their preoccupation with other issues that obscure their view of their own world? The answer is *Yes* to all of the above.

Savvy politicians have learned to play them like fish on a line. They continually convince the poor, rural people of the Southern states to vote against their own best interests and keep conservative candidates in power.

Conservative Pols court poor Southerners because they're easy. They vote emotionally. They respond to candidates who swagger like John Wayne in a WWII movie. The candidates aggrandize the military, wave the flag, and belittle those who rely on welfare payments. And when the candidates get in some kind of trouble, like behind in the polls, they quickly gear down to their old standby's, the Furious Four.

### **The Furious Four**

These are the candidates' Weapons of Mass Distraction. The "Furious Four" are; Gun control, Abortion, Flag-burning and Same-sex marriage -- four issues that get poor Southerners mad as hell, but rarely touch their lives.

These distractions take the focus off the real issues, so the poor dupes end up voting for more tax cuts for the rich guys, and yielding less help for schools, economics and health care.

That's why education levels and public health statistics in Southern states remain the worst in the nation. And as long as these people keep so steeped in what they call religion, that's the way it's always going to be.

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Dennis Martin Altman is the author of "The First Liberal -- a Secular look at Jesus' socio-political ideas, how they became the basis of modern Liberalism."

The book traces the development of the Liberal tradition that began with "Love Thy Neighbor"---from Jesus, to Locke, to Jefferson, to Franklin, to Voltaire, to Gladstone, to FDR to today. Altman is a professor at the University of Kentucky, and can be reached at [www.thefirstliberal.com](http://www.thefirstliberal.com), and [denalt2@gmail.com](mailto:denalt2@gmail.com).