

BOOKS, ARTS & MANNERS

The Limits of Reconstruction

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I DO windows but I do not review anthologies. They tend to be disparate collections of disjointed thoughts. However, *The Loss of Virtue*, a collection of 15 short essays, with an introduction by Digby Anderson, the English social critic and columnist for *NATIONAL REVIEW*, and a foreword by John O'Sullivan, the editor of *NR*, is different. Together, they provide a cogent, secular, social conservative analysis of our time and advance suggestions for an era of reconstruction. I chose my words carefully: "secular, social conservative," not religious nor simply conservative. For decades intellectuals have been following the popular tradition of dichotomizing thought, without allowing for gradations or variants, by relying on the simplistic opposition of "liberal" versus "conservative." The descriptive power of this pair of terms, which was always rather limited, has been further diminished by the new vigor of conservative thinking in the last two decades.

This volume makes a clear distinction between laissez-faire conservatives and the social kind (although

The Loss of Virtue: Moral Confusion and Social Disorder in Britain and America, edited by Digby Anderson (National Review Books, 258 pp., \$19.95)

these terms are not employed). The book argues that while capitalism may well be highly successful, it does not attend to the important moral, social realm, the one that defines and fosters virtues, which are the foundation of a good society.

As its title indicates, the volume speaks of the decline of old virtues such as character (or self-government), diligence, respect for authority, fidelity, and honesty. As replacements for the old virtues, *The Loss of Virtue* argues we have on the one hand a "new morality," and on the other a troubling lack of cultural consensus. Several authors speak of a "new mo-

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reality" which has, they argue, at best a dubious standing. This morality mints new rights but skirts the con-



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cept of duty; and it celebrates hedonism, egalitarianism, and subjectivism in the name of self-actualization. Other essays focus on the lack of consensus about the definition of the "good" facing our age, and the resulting moral anarchy and relativism. Moreover, our cultural dissensus is said to prevent us from even supporting those minimum virtues upon which a democratic order must rely.

Various essays focus on specific aspects of this general problem. One of the best, which appeared originally in *NR*, laments the loss of tolerance and its replacement by neutrality. Tolerance, John Gray writes, presumes a

set of values. But it recognizes the imperfectibility of human beings and hence treats with understanding those who struggle to do what is right but do not quite make it—at one point or another, all of us. Neutrality, which Gray believes has replaced tolerance, is the standard of those who argue, as leading liberals do, that defining a societal good or virtue is incompatible with a truly democratic society. For them, once you define a virtue all those who do not subscribe to it are treated as inferior, which is but one step toward moral and legal support for discrimination, if not persecution. Hence, to treat all values and "lifestyle options" as if they have the same moral standing (or none) is the call of liberals like Bruce Ackerman, whom Gray correctly decries for ultimately cultivating a social ethic of intolerance as communities become indifferent to the cultural values that nurture tolerance in the first place.

A number of essays, by Richard Lynn and Robert Grant (regarding the family), and Antony O'Hear and Dennis O'Keeffe (on schools), deal with the importance of proper education, of character formation, for a society that has sound moral foundations. Values must be "internalized": that is, become part of the self rather than external demands that members of society heed because they fear punishments or seek rewards. This is essential, for if values remain external, whenever incentives fail or authorities slacken, moral behavior will drop off. Because there will never be enough pay-offs and guardians to ensure that a society is civil, most virtuous behavior must take place because the population has truly accepted the values transmitted to them as theirs. Self-discipline, not discipline, is the mark of a moral, well-brought-up youngster.

The merits of the book are especially noteworthy in view of the fact that all its 15 authors are British and many of the examples they cite are from recent British history or experience. (No hint or explanation is given for the exclusion of all other authors, especially as the subtitle of the book refers to "moral confusion and social disorder in Britain and America.") But never mind: the points made apply to the U.S. as much as they would had the authors written from the banks of the Charles, the Hudson, and the Potomac.

Social conservatives who want to make the process of fostering values the responsibility of a virtuous elite may try to make the case for this approach but cannot disregard the task of explaining how the new or renewed commitment to values is to arise.

Last but not least is the question of rights and responsibilities. I deeply agree with the argument that the manufacture of new rights has gotten out of hand to the point where, as when a currency is inflated, their value is diminished and sometimes trivialized. We can all trade horror stories about people suing Macy's for the right to play Santa Claus and environmentalists who suggest that sand has a "natural" right to lie on the beach undisturbed by developers. But this is too easy. The tough questions are: should we curtail the new rights and return to a short list of basic ones?

If yes, what is to be excluded from the shortened list of rights? And on what grounds is one going to deny many of the new rights—those that are not preposterous on the face of it? I would argue that the nobler path points to shoring up responsibilities, and asking all those who claim new rights (say, to health care) to match them with new responsibilities (for giving or paying for health care). In an essay on national service in this volume, Chris Dandeker makes this point, noting that the problem with the new rights is that they have not been accompanied by new obligations.

At whatever conclusions one arrives on these crucial issues, read this book and pass it on to others. *The Loss of Virtue* provides a fine basis for a moral assessment of our time, both in what it addresses and in that which it implies remains to be addressed □
