

# THE HERITAGE LECTURES

515

The  
American  
Tradition of  
Personal  
Responsibility

*By Dennis Prager*



The Heritage Foundation was established in 1973 as a non-partisan, tax-exempt policy research institute dedicated to the principles of free competitive enterprise, limited government, individual liberty, and a strong national defense. The Foundation's research and study programs are designed to make the voices of responsible conservatism heard in Washington, D.C., throughout the United States, and in the capitals of the world.

Heritage publishes its research in a variety of formats for the benefit of policy makers; the communications media; the academic, business, and financial communities; and the public at large. Over the past five years alone The Heritage Foundation has published some 1,500 books, monographs, and studies, ranging in size from the 927-page government blueprint, *Mandate for Leadership III: Policy Strategies for the 1990s*, to the more frequent "Critical Issues" monographs and the topical "Backgrounders," "Issue Bulletins," and "Talking Points" papers. Heritage's other regular publications include the *Business/Education Insider*, and *Policy Review*, a quarterly journal of analysis and opinion.

In addition to the printed word, Heritage regularly brings together national and international opinion leaders and policy makers to discuss issues and ideas in a continuing series of seminars, lectures, debates, briefings, and conferences.

Heritage is classified as a Section 501(c)(3) organization under the Internal Revenue Code of 1954, and is recognized as a publicly supported organization described in Section 509(a)(1) and 170(b)(1)(A)(vi) of the Code. Individuals, corporations, companies, associations, and foundations are eligible to support the work of The Heritage Foundation through tax-deductible gifts.

*Note: Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.*

**The Heritage Foundation**  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.  
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999  
U.S.A.  
202/546-4400

# The American Tradition Of Personal Responsibility

By Dennis Prager

There is a saying, apparently from Oregon, that you do not know how big a tree is until you cut it down. It is a human tendency not to value something until it is under assault or lost.

I never would have thought about the American tradition of personal responsibility in any systematic fashion if it were not being attacked as broadly as it is. The same thing happened to me with regard to religion. I came to religion in large measure because I have seen what happens when it disappears. I came to realize that there is no alternative to religion, morally and in many other ways. That is why, though I am a Jew, I hold that a post-Christian America is a frightening prospect. I know that when Christianity died in Europe in the twentieth century, Communism and Nazism arose in its place.

Who would have thought about personal responsibility so much were it not for the present onslaught against it? I will therefore address the onslaught more than I will the specific tradition. But I begin with the tradition.

## The American Ideal of Individualism

Why was the United States founded? The noted liberal thinker, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., in his book *The Disuniting of America*—about “multiculturalism” and the balkanization of America—made me aware of how to formulate a concise answer.

Ask the average American today what is unique about the American idea, and I doubt you will get a coherent answer. The last generations of Americans have failed to transmit the worth of our society—just as, incidentally, most Jews and Christians of the last generation failed to transmit the worth of their respective religions. Nearly all people take things for granted—back to my opening thesis. We assume that since things have gone well until now, they will go well in the future. Yet, Trotsky was right: we need a “permanent revolution.” Every generation has to rediscover—though not necessarily reinvent—the wheel, morally and ideologically. You cannot rely on the fact that because parents do something, their children will. The fact that you play Mozart beautifully on the piano guarantees nothing about your children’s love of Mozart, let alone their ability to play it. Parents and educators need to teach each succeeding generation the unique worth of Mozart.

So, too, parents and educators need to teach each succeeding generation of Americans the unique worth of America. By and large, they have not.

---

Dennis Prager writes *Ultimate Issues*, a quarterly journal of his views on life, has daily radio talk shows on WABC in New York and KABC in Los Angeles, and does a nationally syndicated daily television show, “The Dennis Prager Show,” which appears in 146 cities. He also is co-director of Empower America.

He spoke at The Heritage Foundation on September 20, 1994, as part of the lecture series “Sweet Land of Liberty: Strengthening America’s Culture,” sponsored by the Henry Salvatori Foundation.

ISSN 0272-1155 © 1995 by The Heritage Foundation.

What is unique about our society? *The United States was a society founded on the almost unique belief that who your ancestors are is far less important than who you are.* This was a monumentally important belief about the worth of the individual. Of course, there was a terrible exception in practice—the attitude toward blacks. The idea of the supreme worth of the individual rather than of his ancestry was violated in the case of the African. But holding values and violating them was hardly unique to many of our country's founders. It is true for all of us. We all have ideals that we do not fully practice. But I far prefer to live in a society that says "Thou shalt not steal," even though people violate it, than in a society that does not say "Thou shalt not steal."

We need ideals even though people do not always practice them, and even though advocating ideals means that people will inevitably be called hypocrites when they do not live by the ideals that they profess. Hypocrisy, when so understood, is a positive thing. It means that at least you have a value that can render you hypocritical. I therefore have very little problem with hypocrisy. The only alternative is for there to be no ideals. Only then could no one be a hypocrite.

Our society was founded on an ideal: Who your ancestors are doesn't matter; who *you* are matters. You rise or fall on your achievement or your failure. That and economic opportunity, which is a result of the American individualist ideal, are the primary reasons why America has been the world's most popular magnet to people from every culture. That is why immigrants often say that they are more comfortable here than in their native El Salvador, their native Nigeria, or anywhere else. That is why, historically, we tended to attract individualists who wanted to be judged not by their ethnicity, geography, or race, but by who they are.

Now, of course, this value, like any value, can be taken to an extreme. And it is when people have no attachments at all and become atomized individuals. That is one reason why a part of America suffers a terrible plague of loneliness. As a talk show host for 12 years, I have become aware of this widespread loneliness from my callers. The number of Americans who have no attachments to anything—not to a religious group, not to a stamp club, not to a musical society—is large and rising. That's the dark side of individualism—the sun-dering of ties to any group. By the way, I am convinced that animal love in America has reached the point that it has reached because of this lack of human attachments. For many people, their greatest bond is with an animal. It is nice to have pets, but when pets become "animal companions," we have crossed a threshold. It is important to remember that every blessing can have its curse.

To return, our society was founded on the value of the individual, and that is a major reason many of us love it. Our ancestors moved here not just because it was economically advantageous. After all, why do people line up at American embassies more than at Swiss, Saudi, or Japanese embassies? Saudi Arabia and Japan are richer per capita than America is. But these people know not only that they can make a living here, but also that they could fit in. Because whatever their color, race, or religion, it is often better to be in America.

As Orlando Patterson, who is black and a professor of sociology at Harvard, has noted, a black has more political and social and civil rights in the United States than anywhere in Africa. It is also true about an Arab. An Arab coming to this country has more rights than he or she does in nearly any Arab country. Speaking from within my religion, Reform and Conservative Jews have more religious rights here than in Israel. It is ironic, and yet it is a fact. And I note this with enormous respect for Israel's extraordinary democratic achievement.



That people can feel not only free, but comfortable, no matter what their family background, race, ethnicity, or religion, is a unique achievement in human history.

In *Who Prospers?*, an important book by Lawrence Harrison, the author asks why North America prospered while Latin America didn't. He lists a number of reasons. Among them is what he calls "familism." In Catholic Latin America, as opposed to Protestant North America, people had felt that they could trust only members of their family, not the stranger. In the United States, on the other hand, blood ties were less important than anywhere else on this planet.

That doesn't mean family didn't mean much in America. But it did mean, for example, that if you wanted to start a business, it didn't have to be with your son or your brother-in-law. As I read Harrison, I thought about Iraq today. Saddam Hussein's tyranny is built largely on clans and relatives. They are the only people he can trust. The head of internal security, Iraq's official torturing agency, is related to Saddam, and so on. It has been like this throughout most of the world—but not in the United States. In the United States, thanks largely to the Protestant tradition, the individual was sacrosanct.

## Individual Responsibility

Along with this individualism came individual responsibility: Just as I am rewarded for my good behavior, I am accountable for my bad behavior. This belief was a result of the individualism just described and of the Judeo-Christian ethic that also animated the founders of this country. Essential to Judaism and Christianity is the notion that you are accountable for your behavior—to God, ultimately.

This has been under attack. I remember reading about a liberal Reform rabbi whom the *Los Angeles Times* quoted as saying that "God is not judgmental." Now, that is a quite remarkable statement for a rabbi. If Judaism taught anything, it is that God judges all people all the time. Indeed, the holiest day of the Jewish calendar, Yom Kippur, is also called *Yom Ha-Din*, the Day of Judgment. For on this day, God judges not only each Jew, but every human on Earth.

According to Maimonides, the codifier of Jewish law, one of the thirteen principles of Judaism is that there is reward and punishment for human behavior. In other words, we are responsible and accountable for what we do. I often imagine a modern-day, responsibility-denying liturgy on Yom Kippur. Instead of reciting the long list of sins contained in our traditional liturgy, we would say, "For the sin of my society for making me do this; for the sin of my socioeconomic environment for making me do that...in fact, God, please understand that I am not personally responsible for any sin that I committed. There is no such thing as personal sin, only social injustice, so I do not even know what I'm doing here. I think I'll go home and eat."

American individualism and the Judeo-Christian notion of personal accountability gave us the extraordinary nation that we built here.

## The Death of Stigma

One source of the onslaught against personal responsibility and accountability is secularism. As a secular individual in a secular, multi-ethnic society, to whom will I be accountable? Without a religious code, a religious community, a God, or a homogeneous secular ethnic community, to whom am I responsible? Obviously, only to the authorities—but what if I can elude the authorities?—and to myself.

In America today, much of society holds that we are responsible only to ourselves. We have interiorized everything: We—nothing outside of us—and how we *feel*—not how we behave—are all that matter in assessing us. As a result, we are witnessing the death of a very important socializing tool—stigma.

A *New York Times* article several years ago reported that the out-of-wedlock birth rate in Harlem was 89 percent. But what was most remarkable about the article, especially considering its source, was that it gave as one of the reasons for this high illegitimacy rate the lack of stigma over being a single mother.

The lack of stigma is by no means only applicable to inner-city black life. It has become almost universal. Do something bad today, and not only do you not suffer stigma, you may become a national media star. The murderer of John Lennon has been interviewed on one of the most respectable national television interview shows. Tonya Harding is becoming a movie actress. Kids are trading O.J. Simpson trading cards.

Stigma means personal accountability to society's standards. It is society's way of declaring something wrong without sending you to prison. In lieu of laws, we have stigma.

Of course, stigma, too, can have a terrible side. It can be misapplied. For example, people used to suffer stigma for seeing a psychiatrist. But the answer to wrongly applied stigma is not the abolition of stigma; it is correctly applied stigma. Unfortunately, however, when something important is done wrong, instead of doing it right, people often drop it. That is what has happened with religion. Many people, aware that much evil has been done in the name of religion, have concluded that religion is unnecessary. But that is no more appropriate a response than dropping medicine is the appropriate response to Nazi doctors having performed horrific experiments without anesthetics on human beings. The fact that there are evil doctors means that we must rid ourselves of evil doctors, not that we must rid ourselves of medicine. The fact that there are people who murder in the name of God means that we must teach goodness in the name of God, not get rid of God and religion. The fact that stigma was often misapplied does not mean we can do away with stigma.

## **Responsibility Only to Self: Feelings over Behavior**

Without accountability to an outside authority or standard, and without stigma, the only remaining responsibility is to self. Self—which may have once meant one's conscience but now simply means one's feelings—has become for many people the one standard of behavior: If I feel good, the act is good. I have no accountability to anyone or anything but my feelings.

I'll never forget how in the 1960s, when I was in high school, one day I picked up the *New York Post*, which at the time was excerpting a book titled, I believe, *How To Be An Assertive Woman*. That day's lesson was for a woman to go into as many stores as possible and ask for change of a \$20 bill. The point was that though you do not need the change, asking for it will teach you how to make demands on people. I wondered at the time: What if many women followed this? Wouldn't that annoy a great many people who work in stores? But it didn't matter to the author of this book. The fact that you would drive storekeepers crazy didn't matter. What mattered is that you are feeling good about yourself. You, the new assertive woman, only have to answer to yourself.

The incident I have most often cited to illustrate the rise in feelings-based values happened to my oldest son. Once, when he was two years old, a five-year-old bully walked over and threw him to the ground. The bully's mother frantically ran over to her son, held him, and said, "What's troubling you, darling?"

I know nothing about this woman, but of one thing I was certain—that she attended graduate school. I am certain of this because hers was a learned response. Most human beings would have yelled at their child “What are you doing?” and probably would have punished the child. You need many years of an American liberal arts education to learn that the proper response to a bully is to ask the bully what is troubling him.

“What’s troubling you?” means that your feelings, not your actions, are what are most important.

We monitor personal feelings more than personal behavior. This completely undermines personal responsibility for the obvious reason that personal responsibility means responsibility for our *behavior*. Therefore, the more we preoccupy ourselves with monitoring our feelings and motives, the less we will be concerned with personal responsibility. This exaggeration of the importance of feelings was recently manifested by film director Oliver Stone, who was quoted in *The New Yorker* in August 1994 as saying that the difference between thinking about murder and committing murder is “not major.”

I suspect that I am not alone in caring far more about how people *act* toward me than how they *feel* about me. We care about how our closest friends and relatives feel about us. But concerning the rest of humanity, we only care how they treat us. If a waiter is nice to me only because that’s his job, that’s fine. I do not expect to be loved by waiters. If deep down he doesn’t particularly care if I “have a nice day” but acts toward me as if he does care, that’s fine; it adds to the level of decency in society. I much prefer it to a waiter who acts true to his feelings—“You know, frankly, sir, I can’t stand you and all the other people who come into this restaurant and who make much more money than I do.”

The fact is that we rarely care about others’ feelings; we care about their behavior.

The primacy of motives and feelings, though, is an important characteristic of modern liberal thought. That is why Marxism and socialism have had such a better reputation in modern, secular, liberal life than capitalism. Capitalism is rooted in selfish motives. Socialism is rooted, for the most part, in idealism, even perhaps in altruism. Yet, capitalism has produced far more altruistic societies than socialism and Marxism. “To each according to his needs, from each according to his ability” is far more noble sounding and beautifully motivated than “the profit motive.” I learned from the capitalism/Communism difference not to judge motives, but to judge behavior.

Yet, we have raised a generation to value and monitor their feelings rather than their behavior. High school seniors all over the country, like Oliver Stone, believe that what you feel is almost no different from what you do. I have repeatedly asked them this question: Imagine two wealthy men, equally wealthy in every way. Each is approached by a woman whose daughter has cancer. The woman explains that without more money she cannot afford an operation that will save her daughter’s life. Upon hearing the woman’s story, one of the men began to cry and, in the midst of his tears, gave the woman a dollar. The other man did not cry. In fact, he had another appointment and therefore couldn’t even stay to hear the woman’s entire story. But being a religious person who felt obligated to the biblical law of tithing, he gave the woman fifty dollars. “Who,” I ask the groups, “did a better thing?” Overwhelmingly, students answer, “The one who gave the dollar, because he gave from his heart.”

It is a profound illustration of how behavior has come to matter less than feelings. And since only feelings matter, how can you be responsible for your behavior?



Incidentally, whenever I have asked the question to poorer kids, they all vote for the \$50 man. But it is not usually the poor kids who will set the agenda in our country. It is the kids at Beverly Hills High School, who vote for the one dollar man, who will attend the Harvards and UCLAs and ultimately go into the media and political positions that will set the society's agenda. And they tend to value feelings over behavior. But you can't pay for surgery with tears. You can't pay for a meal with sympathy. That is why the man who gave \$50 did a 50 times better thing. That is the only possible answer.

God may judge hearts, but humans must judge actions. That is all we can judge, because none of us always knows our own motives, let alone the motives of others. We are a mixture of so many motives.

If someone discovers a cure for cancer of the pancreas because he wants the Nobel Prize for medicine, do you care? You care that someone who has cancer of the pancreas is now going to live. This belief that motives and feelings are what matter destroys personal responsibility. America is becoming a feelings-based society. That's why the mother asked, "How do you feel?" to her son the bully instead of worrying about that later and yelling at him, at the moment he bullied, "Never do that again. I do not care how depressed you are. I do not care how socioeconomically deprived you feel."

## **The Battle Against Religion**

One consequence of the war on personal responsibility is that those who do judge behavior are called the worst thing you can be called today—judgmental. Here is how it works:

- ◆ Personal responsibility means you could be judged guilty.
- ◆ We never want to be judged guilty.
- ◆ So we must stop people who make such judgments.
- ◆ We stop them by calling them judgmental.

The desire to escape judgment and personal responsibility is a large part of the reason for the widespread anger at religion in America. Let's analyze this anger for a moment. If anybody should fear the Christian Right, it would be, of course, a non-Christian. Yet, I am Jewish and do not fear the Christian Right.

It is an interesting question to ponder: Why is there so much fear of the Christian Right in the United States? After all, Christianity in America did not give us the Crusades. Christianity in America does not have a history of inquisition. Christianity in America has largely been tolerant. Why, then, all the fear about a religious resurgence in America?

The answer is largely that religion has something that is anathema to the modern flight from personal responsibility—a higher code whereby we can say, "You're guilty. You're wrong. You are responsible." That is the ultimate reason for the fear of religion in America and why that fear is felt so often by those opposed to personal responsibility and accountability. Religion comes with the baggage of judgment. It judges your behavior. And that is what the ultimate cultural battle is about: Is all behavior acceptable, or is there such a thing as sin?

As an example of the social/moral importance of God and a religious code, I frequently cite this story. During the riots in Los Angeles, our family watched the looting—some of which was happening blocks from our house—on television. At one point, I looked at my then-nine-year-old son and said, "Look, those people are getting away with taking what they want. Would you loot if you could get away with it?" He said, "No," which I expected.



I was interested in his response to the next question. "Why not?" I asked him. "Because it is against the Ten Commandants," he replied. I then knew that every penny I spent on his Jewish day school was worth it.

As I wrote in *Ultimate Issues*, the quarterly journal that I write, while my son gave the answer that I wanted, most educated parents would want a different answer. Of course, they, too, want their children to say that they wouldn't steal even if they could get away with it, but they would want a different response to the second question: "Why?" They would want their child to answer, "Because I feel (or think) it is wrong." That's the difference between the religious/hierarchy-of-authority view and the liberal, secular/no-hierarchy-of-authority view. It is the Kohlberg scheme of moral excellence versus the Judeo-Christian. The highest level of morality in secular thinking is that you feel it is wrong. In my religion, which I know best, it is the opposite.

Judaism has a remarkable statement in the Talmud: "A person who does something because he is commanded [by God] is greater than one who does something without being commanded." This runs entirely against the modern outlook which holds that the highest good is good done not out of obligation, but because one feels it is good. What could be more noble than doing right from inner feeling? The answer is that, for the good of society, it is far preferable to do what is right out of obligation to a higher authority. If we rely on everyone doing what he or she thinks is right, we are finished, unless you believe in the innate goodness of humanity, which no great religion believes in.

This is a very important distinction. I do not want to rely on what people feel is right. I've seen the result. It is called a declining America.

I did a television show in Cleveland with students from six high schools of different ethnic, racial, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. I asked them, *on camera*, "How many of you would shoplift from a department store if you really wanted something badly and were certain you wouldn't get caught?" Virtually every student, rich or poor, white or black, raised his or her hand. What amazed me was not so much that they would, but that they raised their hands *on camera*. Now, why would they raise their hands on camera? Because there is no stigma. Some people of my generation also would have shoplifted from a department store, of course. But they never would have raised their hands on camera. What if their parents saw? What if neighbors saw? Teachers? But today, "Hey, it doesn't matter; that's how I feel." That's all that matters.

In 20 years of asking high school seniors, "Would you save your dog or a stranger first if both were drowning?" one-third always vote for the dog, one-third always for the stranger, and one-third always find the question too difficult. That's no longer what interests me. It is my second question that interests me. I ask the students who would vote to save the person, "Would you say that the students who voted to save the dog are wrong?" Not one student in all the years I've asked this has ever said that the students who would save their dog first are wrong. Their argument is always the same: "Listen, I personally feel that I should save the person, but they feel they should save their dog."

So, then, how could there be any personal responsibility if all that matters are me and my feelings, since I am then accountable to me and only me? Not to society. Not to God, a religion, parents, or teachers. To no one. That is what has happened in America. That is why there is moral chaos. Feelings are all that matter, not behavior. I cannot be judged, and I cannot judge you. That is the way we've raised a generation.

## Redefining Tolerance to Mean Approval

As defined by one major dictionary, “tolerate” means “to allow without prohibiting or opposing; to permit.” As now redefined, “tolerate” means “not only to permit, but to approve.”

Let me touch on what I believe to be the most difficult contemporary example—homosexuality. I believe that, except for incest, we must tolerate any consensual sexual behavior among adults. I also strongly believe that any dismissal of the humanity of a homosexual person is immoral; a gay person is created in God’s image, just as is any other human being, and is as likely to do good as any other human. But while I must tolerate homosexuality and honor the personhood of the homosexual, I do not have to say, “I honor same-sex love as the equal of male-female love.”

It is virtually impossible to hold such a position today, however. Tolerance of homosexuals without full acceptance of homosexuality renders you a “homophobe,” and discussion is thereby ended. If you state that male-female love should be society’s ideal, you are deemed so morally inferior as to be unworthy of dialogue.

Now, there are indeed anti-gay bigots, and it pains me deeply that a human would judge another solely by his homosexuality. But we have a right to judge sexual behavior even while tolerating it and respecting the individual. And I do judge it because of the tradition I come from. My Jewish religion says that male sexual love should be confined to one female and to marriage and that there are varying degrees of wrongful deviation from that ideal, some of which are less significant, like consenting adult premarital sex, and some of which are more significant, like adultery, incest, and, yes, homosexuality.

I am stuck with a code, if you will. Without that code, what would I care if people slept with the same sex?

Whatever your position regarding homosexuality, however, the fact remains that the new meaning of tolerance—approval—is another attempt to do away with personal responsibility.

## Opposition to Failing

The onslaught against individual responsibility takes yet another form—opposition to competition. Personal responsibility means that just as you have the right to succeed because of your actions, you will be able to fail because of your actions. In America today, however, there is a movement to have no one fail.

One example is grades: At some universities today, a student cannot get a failing grade, and only rarely will he or she receive a poor passing grade. The thinking is: “We do not want to judge your behavior as a student; we only want your feelings about yourself to be good. If you get a D or an F, you may feel bad.”

Competition is dismissed as a bad, macho thing. The liberated person is against teams or individuals competing. We should learn only to cooperate. The fact that excellence can almost never be created without competition is denied.

That is why there is a war against excellence. Excellence means that I am graded—and being graded, like being judged, implies that I am responsible for what I do.

The war against the possibility of failure has a more significant upshot. It is part of the reason for the support of a welfare state. In his important book, *Dead Right*, conservative writer David Frum makes this point well: If the state will support me, why be personally responsible and save money?

I was raised with middle-class values such as, “You better save. If you make money, put some of it away. There may be a rainy day.” The modern attitude in America is that when there is a rainy day, others should, and will, supply umbrellas. In the meantime, therefore, borrow and spend as irresponsibly as you want.

This opposition to personal responsibility was recently manifested in the arguments for national health care. Its proponents argued that preexisting medical conditions should not be considered an issue in obtaining health insurance. But if that is the case, why ever buy insurance? I will purchase insurance only once I get sick. It is another form of relinquishing personal responsibility—“I do not have to plan while things are going all right for me.” Now, of course, it is a problem when people have preexisting conditions from childhood; and there are other areas that need reform. But think philosophically for a moment: If a preexisting condition cannot be a factor in whether you get insurance, why get insurance until you get the condition?

## No One Is Guilty

Yet another battle against personal accountability/responsibility is the battle against guilt. No one is guilty of behavior: If you steal, you are the product of socioeconomic forces; if you’re 15 years old and get pregnant, it is because there weren’t enough condoms and you didn’t get a good enough sex education in school; if you murder, it is because you had too easy access to a gun and/or because you were raised in a poor neighborhood.

This attitude prevailed during the Cold War. The same people who blame guns as much or more than they blame criminals for crime in America blamed the Cold War on nuclear weapons more than on the Soviet Union. But as I pointed out then, if nuclear weapons were the problem, why didn’t anybody fear French or English nuclear weapons? We didn’t because it wasn’t Soviet weapons that worried us; it was Soviet values.

Some of us actually judged the Soviet Union. And some, like the journal *Psychology Today*, did not. When the Soviets shot down the Korean airliner, it editorialized that it was an act of “paranoia,” not an act of aggression. Few are guilty.

This was an example of another way of undermining personal responsibility—psychologizing actions rather than judging them. Rather than good and evil, there is healthy and sick. For example, men who rape are often labeled sick. But they are not all necessarily sick. They may be normal—but bad. It comes as sad news to many modern women—men are by nature rapists. “I like woman, I take woman” is male nature. The reason that most men do not rape is because they hold values that forbid them to, not because it is foreign to their nature. There are armies that rape and there are armies that do not rape, and the armies that rape do not do so because they consist almost entirely of sick men. The soldiers of the Red Army were not all sick. But they did have 28 years of nihilism in their country. A generation was raised with no right and wrong, just Communist Party notions of what is “progressive.”

I would go farther and argue that some good acts are sick. What if the daughter of an upper-middle-class couple in America said, “You know what, Mom and Dad? Thanks for spending all that money so I could graduate from Yale. I’ll be going to Calcutta to take care of the dead and dying for the rest of my life.” Her parents would think she was a bit sick. They would probably respond, “We think you need some advice, honey, some counseling. Then you’ll decide on law school.”

Picking up the dying and dead is, of course, what Mother Teresa decided to do. Maybe she is sick. This is not meant hyperbolically or rhetorically. Extraordinary self-sacrifice may not be normal.



I do not know if the blacks who beat Reginald Denny were sick. And I do not know if the blacks who saved the lives of non-blacks during the Los Angeles riots were all normal. We cannot know exactly what normal and sick are, but we can and do know what good and evil are.

We have substituted normal and sick for good and evil, and that, again, means no personal responsibility. How can you be held responsible if you did what you did because you are sick?

## **Race, Gender, and Class Determine Behavior**

The war against individual responsibility has taken another new form called Race-Gender-Class. Our universities have substituted a new trinity for the classic Trinity of the past. For Christians, it was the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; for the educated elite, it is Race, Gender, and Class. Personal behavior is determined by my race, gender, and/or class, not by my values and my free moral will. It is therefore not possible to make a moral judgment about antisocial behavior by members of selected races, by “the poor,” or by women (especially when one person combines all three identities, which explains the widespread feminist understanding for Lorena Bobbit’s mutilation of her husband’s genitals).

On my television show, I recently debated a UCLA professor of education. He kept protesting, “Who are you to say that there is one standard of behavior? You’re a white male. You do not know about victims.” Finally, I responded angrily, “Please do not lecture me on victims; one-third of my people were put in gas chambers one generation ago.” He was taken aback because he did not know that I was Jewish. Until then I was just a white male, but now I had victim status, so I had a great deal of clout.

James Baldwin, the black novelist, once said that sometimes, when he gets into an impish mood at a cocktail party and wants to find out quickly which whites are racist, he says some particularly stupid thing, and any white who tells him how brilliant it was, he knows is a racist.

That is why I consider liberal racism the most dangerous and pervasive form of racism in America today. Of course, there is right-wing racism. And it is evil. But it is obvious and relatively rare. Liberal racism, however, is more pernicious because it is far more ubiquitous.

It is very simple to define. When whites in Germany burn down Turkish homes, they are called Fascists. When blacks in Los Angeles burn down Korean homes, they are called misunderstood. This is a terrible insult to a black person. It says: “We think so low of you that we do not hold the same moral criteria for you that we do for others.” That is the liberal message of the last generation to blacks, as it is to Hispanics regarding their intelligence: “Every generation of immigrants to America had to learn English, but you’re so intellectually inferior that we will have you learn and study in Spanish.” I read no other meaning in bilingual education than a view that Hispanics are less intelligent than Russians, Poles, Germans, and everybody else who came to this country.

There is no one standard to which all people are accountable any more. And that’s what Race-Gender-Class does. It subverts responsibility.

## **Compassion Rather than Standards**

Finally, you can have responsibility only if you have standards. I mentioned this earlier with regard to a code of ethics—if you’re not responsible to a God or a religion or some code above you, you cannot be held responsible for your behavior.



There is one other way in which we have obliterated standards, and therefore responsibility. We have substituted compassion for standards. Whenever there is a conflict in America between compassion and standards, compassion wins lest, again, we judge you. I was a guest on a national television show, and all the other guests were single women who chose to become mothers. I had a feeling of what the Christians felt like with the lions: I was on a national talk show where I was not allowed on the first segment of the hour show. The guests were three highly attractive, highly intelligent women with their lovely kids. The host was female, as was virtually the entire audience, which agreed with the women about how beautiful it was that they decided, not having found a man, to have a kid. And then I was introduced: "And now, someone who thinks they're wrong." For that alone, however, my appearance was worth it, the word "wrong" not having been uttered on television talk shows since Phil Donahue started his first show.

Then Darth Vader Prager entered the scene and was asked, "Do you really think these women are wrong?" I put every ounce of charm I have ever been endowed with into my answer and responded, "Yes, I do."

Yes, I think it is wrong because I think that children should have the right at least to begin life with a mother and a father. If there's divorce, if there's abandonment, if there's death, what are you going to do? But to start out with mommy and test tube doesn't strike me as being as good as mommy and daddy.

My wife and I have single women friends who are torn about this. They are dying to get married, yet cannot find a man to marry, and they are dying to have a child before they can no longer conceive. Anybody who does not feel compassion toward these many women is not fully human. But to empathize with pain and feel compassionate is one thing, and to drop standards is another.

Gays, too, are in pain. Not to acknowledge that pain is not to be fully human. But to say then that because they are in pain society should have no preference for male-female love as the society's ideal is as wrong as to say that because the single mother is in pain we have no preference for children being born with a mother and father.

The government is on the brink of establishing new national adoption rules. According to these new rules, same-sex couples will be allowed to adopt as readily as opposite-sex couples. That is simply incredible. Even Denmark, which allows homosexual marriage, forbids homosexual adoption. We will be the only society on Earth to say that we have no preference for children to have a mother and father. To say that a mother is unnecessary, or that a father is unnecessary, is so obviously untrue that it needs to be explained by a larger agenda. That agenda is to prefer personal rights—I want a child—to social responsibility—a child should be given a mother and father.

To demand that people take personal responsibility for their behavior is extremely difficult. It doesn't come naturally to any of us. Perhaps the case for it can best be made by using other words to describe the assuming of personal responsibility. Those words are "growing up."

