

Cultural Renewal: The Principle of Religious and Ethical Restraint

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IT IS A SIGN of the low estate of late twentieth-century American culture, perhaps, that a book entitled *Cultural Conservatism*¹ is given over largely to advocacy of a public-policy agenda and only secondarily to discussion of the substantive issues of culture. Many of the book's policy prescriptions may be quite sound. Particularly valuable are some of the book's suggestions for strengthening the family, restoring discipline and purpose to the schools, and promoting a renewed sense of order, stability, and community in our cities and neighborhoods. Also encouraging are several key affirmations put forward by authors William Lind and William Marshner that portend a departure by American conservatism from overreliance on abstract libertarian formulations. One is their statement that "government, including the Federal government, has legitimate tasks and duties, including not only upholding public order but also promoting the general welfare and the common good"—a general proposition with which one can agree without assenting to all of the authors' specific proposals for government involvement.² Another is their recognition that property rights, though essential to the good society, are not absolute in any abstract sense and imply certain corresponding duties, such as a "commitment to community, charity, and capital formation."³

Though overshadowed by the book's heavy concentration on policy questions, much of what Lind and Marshner say about the substance of culture, beginning with their definition in the introductory chapter, hits the mark. Culture, they note,

is the ways of thinking, living and behaving that define a people and

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underlie its achievements. It is a nation's collective mind, its sense of right and wrong, the way it perceives reality, and its definition of self. Culture is the morals and habits a mother strives to instill in her children. It is the obligations we acknowledge toward our neighbors, our community, and our government. It is the worker's dedication to craftsmanship and the owner's acceptance of the responsibilities of stewardship. It is the standards we set and enforce for ourselves and for others; our definitions of duty, honor, and character. It is our collective conscience.⁴

Lind and Marshner penetrate to the heart of the matter with their recognition that a healthy and vibrant culture will embody "living habits of restraint," rooted in "the long view" of human history and experience. Cultural conservatism, they write, is consonant with "virtually all the world's

"Misguided public policies can certainly wreak havoc relatively quickly on long-established institutions and relationships that have proved beneficial to man's moral and intellectual development. But, once cultural decline has become pronounced and widespread, revitalization is not easily set in motion by mere political activism."

great religions and philosophies" in emphasizing "that limits on instinctive human behavior are necessary for individuals to live rewarding, satisfying lives." By contrast, cultural radicals, or liberationists, "see traditional limits on behavior as unnatural restrictions on happiness."⁵ It is not too much to say that the clash between these warring views of human nature—and the recent ascendancy of the "liberationist" position among cultural elites and opinion molders—constitutes the central challenge of our age.

At the same time that the authors should be commended for stressing the ethical core of culture and the centrality of moral restraint, one must question their tendency to