

evangelical Christians. Their concern is both the regulatory chokehold of the federal government and the coarsening of the culture.

Differences over issues like abortion will remain. It is best to acknowledge those disagreements forthrightly and discuss them freely while stressing unity on the broader agenda. If religious and economic conservatives can cooperate where possible and remain civil in disagreement, they will accomplish far more together than separately.

Ralph Reed

Let's Focus Our Moral Outrage

These days grown-ups piece together circumstantial evidence not to solve a double murder in Los Angeles, but to divine whether or not a Supreme Court Justice uttered the words “there is pubic hair on my Coke can.” Reporters garner from the fact that he kept his *Playboy* copies in the proper sequence signs of obsessiveness (librarians, take note) and indirect proof that he was given to kinky expressions. An FBI agent in Washington, D.C. was severely reprimanded for giving his son a ride to school in the official car, some seven blocks. (Little wonder no one had time to keep an eye on Aldrich Ames.)

In a society in which millions of children promiscuously copulate with children and sire children they cannot possibly take care of, we find the time and moral fervor to fuss about J. Donald Silva, a professor who used unchaste imagery in his English Lit class (something about belly dancing being like a vibrator under a plate). And the ancient English word for copulation was recently removed from the official Scrabble dictionary. Are we about to swing from a grave state of moral deficiency to an overdose of moralism, without even stopping to rest in some kind of a normal state, say somewhere near the golden rule? Or are we going to combine the worst of both worlds,

and continue to be engulfed by truly immoral acts—while we sanctimoniously rail about the moral equivalent of Trivial Pursuit?

Moral fervor can be a good thing, but we must learn not to squander it. Here are some suggested ground rules that might help. First, let's not seek perfection. The professor, public figure, CEO, or reporter who can always get it right has not been born yet. We each utter hundreds of thousands of words. We should allow people to occasionally put their foot in their mouth, pull it out, and walk on, rather than be crucified for an occasional slip of the tongue. Recently Sen. Conrad Burns was raked over the coals for saying, once, that living with blacks in Washington was a challenge. This certainly was not the most felicitous statement one can imagine, but let's keep some sense of perspective. Maybe we should introduce an annual boo-boo allowance.

Second, foul words should be accorded much less weight than misbehavior. Inquiring about the size of intimate parts of the anatomy is uncalled for; grabbing is a much more serious matter. If I traded the spell-check in my computer for a program that rejected "Dutch treat," "normal," and the other five thousand words the L.A. Times determined are politically incorrect, this by itself would hardly make me a good person.

Third, we need a moral equivalent to the statute of limitations. If we remember that only those who have never sinned should cast the first stone, we might be more willing to agree that if the inappropriate acts are not repeated, minor transgressions that took place umpteen years ago (say more than seven) should be expunged from a person's moral record. After all, even proven criminals are allowed to walk once the statute of limitations for their crime has been reached.

A fourth rule of thumb: A pattern of misconduct should be taken much more seriously than isolated events. Driving once under the influence is bad enough; we should be unabashed in the face of repeat offenders. (By the way, given that the average criminal commits several crimes before he is caught once, we should not consider "three strikes and you are out," unduly punitive. It actually amounts to "30 strikes and you are done.")

But even if repeated, not all misconduct should evoke the same level of concern. Parking in spaces designated for the handicapped is ill-considered, but leaving one's children unattended and taking off for Acapulco is much more condemnable. Those who repeatedly use their official phones to make personal long-distance calls, elected officials who ask their bodyguards to help their spouses with the shopping, and executives who pad their expense accounts—all these types should evoke less of a moral criticism than those who rob banks, block fire escapes, or sell bogus replacement parts to airlines.

Above all we should receive much more warmly those who repent, especially if the person restructures his or her life rather than merely expressing regret. Take Housing and Urban Development Secretary Henry Cisneros. He dropped his mistress, reunited with his wife, and returned, as far as the public knows, to the straight and narrow. He is now being hounded because it is said that he told the FBI that his payments to his mistress were \$60,000, while actually they may have been closer to \$200,000, and lasted longer than previously reported. "He lied!" cries the holier-than-thou crowd. I do not condone lying. But if only those who go through life without ever inaccurately completing a tax return, sales report, or news story would speak up, a stunning silence would replace the present choir for perfection.

If we keep stomping on anyone who misspeaks or commits the moral equivalent of jaywalking, we will have ever fewer people of stature willing to assume posts (such as mayor, corporate CEO, foundation head, teacher, etc.) in which they may come under public scrutiny. Much more important: We shall soon become exhausted from a moralistic frenzy in which no one is deemed above reproach. We shall then join the swelling ranks of cynics who believe that everyone is wicked and beyond redemption. We will then turn a deaf ear to the moral voices, believing them to be calls in the wilderness. Believing that we are surrounded by politicians who are crooks, doctors who are out to enrich themselves, and merchants who seek to exploit us, we shall ourselves feel free to join the immoral fray.

In order not to trivialize its moral voice, a community must focus its moral censure where it is most justified rather than taint everything with a broad brush. Maybe we should budget our expressions

of moral dismay, limiting them to, perhaps, 12 acts of censorship per annum. This in turn will encourage us to aim at well-chosen and deserving targets, of which there is no shortage at all. And hopefully we shall be able to increasingly express appreciation for those who act morally all on their own, setting a role model for others.

Amitai Etzioni

In November 1994, Francis Lawrence, President of Rutgers University, posed the questions, "Do we set standards in the future so we don't admit anybody? Or do we deal with a disadvantaged population that doesn't have that genetic, hereditary background to have a higher average?," to a small group of faculty during a two-hour question-and-answer session. A tape of the session surfaced in February 1995. Lawrence repeatedly apologized for his comments. For 30 years, Lawrence is reported to have been a particularly active advocate of minority rights, minority fellowships, and affirmative action. A broad coalition of students, faculty, and national organizations, African American and others, has continuously called for him to resign or be fired.

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