



**Book Review. Public  
Morality and the Culture  
Wars: The Triple Divide,  
by Bryan Fanning, 2023,  
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*SEXTANT-Sexualities, Masculinities  
& Decolonialities*  
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In this work Bryan Fanning contends that certain social values and laws pertaining to these in contemporary Western (and chiefly Anglophone) societies are sourced in tacit and deeply rooted beliefs about human nature in general and the rights and responsibilities of the human person or self in particular. This can be seen in older, more recent and for that matter contemporary debates concerning (but not limited to) censorship and abortion and gay and gender issues. Such debates have become amplified and ever more heated because there is no longer a clear and general consensus about the grounds and character of moral beliefs, a situation recognised most cogently by Alasdair McIntyre.

Two major claims are cashed out in this monograph, namely, that these tacit and deeply rooted beliefs are no less efficacious today than they were in the past and that they split into three major and conflicting types. The first is comprised of the conservative and more commonly Christian beliefs in freedom, responsibility and sinfulness. The second is made up of the classically liberal beliefs in the individual, in tolerance and in the sharp distinction between the public and private spheres of behaviour. The third can be characterized as progressive, and in the main it comprises the modern, post-modern and more often left-wing beliefs in the plastic and socially constructed character of the self.

With remarkable clarity we are shown how these beliefs have played out in society and culture over the last two centuries and over the last few decades. This book is an archeology of contemporary debates on

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contentious issues, and of how our understandings feed into legal theory and concrete practices. It is attentive to the emergence of strange alliances between conservatives and liberals against progressives on certain issues, some of whom wish their values to be enforced, in the sense of being codified in law and public morality. Here they are the successors to the proponents of the other traditions. The author is also careful to give attention to online communities of conservatives, liberals and progressives. Such communities encourage group solidarity and confirmation bias, and more often have quite specific norms and values, the breaching of which usually results in shunning or being cancelled.

From the outset it is clear that Fanning's book makes a substantive and valuable contribution to an interdisciplinary understanding of contemporary debates, drawing deftly as it does on theology, sociology, history, philosophy, psychology and law. It drills down to the hidden suppositions of each opposing position, contextualizing them in the process and providing the reader with an overview in which depth is not sacrificed to breadth.

The first chapter on the propagation and enforcement of morals sets the stage nicely for the subsequent chapters, and it shows how proponents of the belief types have often sought and still seek to impose their beliefs on society and culture. The moves from theological and natural law conceptions of personhood to psychological and liberal and identity views are charted clearly and concisely in the subsequent chapters.

In the second chapter the author points to the enduring significance of the Ten Commandments and then zones in on the ideas of St Augustine, whose influence down all the days from the Fifth Century cannot be quantified. In *The City of God*, Augustine makes the first theological case for the coercive government of sinful human beings. Rough justice is the only way of making most of us behave ourselves, and of stopping many of us from destroying each other. In this deeply pessimistic view of human nature, the earthly judge has to choose between rough justice or social chaos, and must therefore choose the former. Justice contributes to the best organisation of the world as a proving ground for souls. In the *Confessions*, our sinful nature is already evident in early childhood, and we are shown how all these ideas feed into the conservative world view in which wickedness is primarily found within each of us.

In the third chapter on the sovereign self, Fanning makes much of the clear blue water between Augustine and Rousseau, and is quite right to do so. For Rousseau we are born innocent or free from original sin, and we are corrupted first and foremost by external influences. Evil is almost always to be attributed to external forces and institutions. Like Marx and Nietzsche and Freud after him, Rousseau saw culture in its material and psychological structures as oppressive in its current state. Drawing on the

work of Charles Taylor, the author notes that all these masters of suspicion have contributed massively to the social imaginary. This is the way that people cognise and picture their social surroundings under the implicit and often unconscious influence of philosophy and psychology and social theory. In the closing pages of this chapter we encounter the work of Tom Wolfe and Carl Trueman amongst others. The decline of traditional religion, increasing wealth and free time and a conception of human nature as plastic has led to a widespread concern with remaking and remodelling one's self and gender and hence one's sense of self and gender, often cast in non-binary terms. Lying behind what might be called the therapeutic self is an intellectual trajectory that stretches from Rousseau right through to the work of Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler.

In his chapter on liberalism, free speech and intolerance, Fanning notes that the liberal idea of liberty is chiefly concerned with the negative goal of warding off interference in individual freedom or personal autonomy. The concern is to protect people from persecution for deviating from the imperatives of public authority, however well meaning. This can slide all too easily into what Tocqueville called the tyranny of the majority. The foremost thinker in this tradition is of course John Stuart Mill, whose influence on the said tradition is as strong as that of Augustine on Christianity. The author runs through the ways in which this tradition has been challenged by Patrick Devlin and qualified carefully in the European Convention on Human Rights. Questions around the limits of free speech and toleration have also been foregrounded by the American Civil Liberties Union. In 1992 the ACLU stated that the government should have no power to decide which opinions are hateful. More recently it has made far fewer references to free speech, and is chiefly concerned with promoting what its members take to be the most progressive human rights causes. One of the motivations is a genuine concern with the safety of certain minorities.

Chapter Five examines religion, prohibition and censorship, showing how theological conceptions have fed into temperance movements before and after prohibition, and also setting out and discussing the conflicting views on movie censorship and pornography. The author shows how there have been unusual alliances between conservatives and some second-wave feminists on pornography, as can be seen in the works of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. And it is stressed that one can be sex-positive without seeing the objectification of the person or the presumption of availability as being anyway acceptable.

In the following chapter on civil religion, it is observed that the very idea of a civil religion as recommended by Rousseau carries its own risks of intolerance and exclusion. Such an apparently universal religion can usher in a coercive public morality with a pseudo-rational and pseudo-theological

warrant. Mill had already remarked with great acuity that the demand that all people resemble us grows by what it feeds on. All deviations from the tenets of a civil religion can quickly come to be seen as impious, immoral and even monstrous. We can rapidly become unable to conceive of diversity when we have become unused for quite a while to actually experiencing it.

The seventh chapter traverses the ongoing debates as the morality or immorality of abortion, and sets out the opposing and sometimes overlapping views of right and left, secular and religious, conservative, liberal and progressive. The treatment is sensitive and wide ranging, with adroit use being made of insights from thinkers such as Dworkin and Wolf and Taylor. And in the penultimate chapter on sex differences and gender identities, the author begins by traversing Mary Wollstonecraft's critique of Rousseau and *The Second Sex* and *The Feminine Mystique*. Here we find deft overviews of debates on human rights and LGBT+ issues, with a particular focus on contemporary questions of gender identity and transgender identity. Conflicting contributions from Stonewell, Jo Phoenix, Susan Stryker and Kathleen Stock amongst others are set out with considerable care. The need for protection of vulnerable minorities *and* for respectful disagreement are balanced very nicely.

In the ninth and final chapter Fanning provides some pointers to the future of debates on public morality. For all of the recent and occasional alliances of liberals and conservatives, it is noted that both progressives and conservatives share an enthusiasm for enforcing their values in this or that public morality. Liberals are distinctive in that they posit and promote, within limits, the rights of individuals to moral autonomy or freedom from public morality. The author argues that reports of the death of religious influences on public morality have been greatly exaggerated. Some of these can be traced to the Biblical literalism that runs with a hostility to natural science and sustained strategies of othering certain minorities.

Others cannot. In the last century, for example, some religious conservatives maintained, not without justification, that many proponents of biological and social Darwinism asserted that there were higher and lower types of human beings. When the lower types are not of necessity locked away, they should be sterilised. There should be no perpetuation of degenerates. One only has to look at a purportedly scientific textbook for some US schools from 1914 entitled *A Civic Biology: Presented in Problems* to see such views in all their starkness. Fanning rounds off this chapter with sections on different understandings of harm, law, language and cancel cultures, minority rights and cultural pluralism. His conclusion is that public moralities are inevitable, but that the kind of utopian monocultures that might be relished by some religious or secular zealots are unlikely to prevail in complex and diverse societies. Current

settlements are likely to shift, erode and evolve over time, even if one is predominant at any given moment.

Two great strengths of this book are to show how older beliefs have played out in society and culture over the last two centuries and over the last few decades, and how these beliefs have founded and fed into three major and conflicting types. It is of course a basic requirement of any academic study that it not present a parody of a belief type or of a cluster of beliefs. Fanning's book does much more than this, which gets us to the third great strength of this monograph. The author sets out the reasons behind each type, reasons that transcend mere matters of religious or for that matter secular credulity. And he has a rare ability to work empathically into the world of the holder of each belief type. All of these are given their due, which is to say that they are set out fairly and extensively and wherever possible from the holders' perspectives. One can then appreciate how well the author fleshes out Jonathan Haidt's contention that socio-cultural diversity implies viewpoint diversity. Remarkably free of partisanship, this book provides a reliable overview or route map that embraces all the types. Yet the map is not at all sparse. The details are coloured in rather than set out in monochrome, and for that the reader will be grateful.