



Thomas Jefferson Research Center

Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters . . . Nothing is of more importance for the public weal, than to form and train up youth in wisdom and virtue.

Benjamin Franklin

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM IS RESPONSIBILITY

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AMORAL AMERICA

Reviewed by Frank Goble

Sixteen years ago, the Thomas Jefferson Research Center published a report called "Responsibility and Survival," a report, incidentally, that received a Freedom Foundation Award.

"There is mounting recognition, deep concern, and a vast amount of factual evidence," the report stated, "that this nation and the world are drifting in the direction of increasing lawlessness by individuals and governments. We have lived with irresponsibility so long that it has assumed an aura of fashionable respectability. This is quietly, but relentlessly, destroying the very fiber of our society . . .

"What should be the most important part of education, the teaching of responsible behavior, is being badly neglected. Yet this is the key to success of individuals and societies."

A heavily documented study of two

highly respected political scientists confirms the Research Center's earlier conclusion. In *Amoral America** Drs. George C. S. Benson and Thomas S. Engeman state that our astonishing crime rate is largely due to lack of ethical instruction in schools and other opinion-forming institutions.

This book was first published in 1975 by Hoover Institution Press and was reviewed in the September 1976 Jefferson Research Letter. Out of print for several years, the book is now available in hard cover and paperback from Carolina Academic Press.

"Contemporary Western society, and especially American society," writes Dr. Engeman, "suffers from inadequate training in individual ethics. Personal honesty and integrity, appreciation of the interests of others, non-violence, and abiding by the law are examples of values insufficiently taught at the present time."

"Our thesis," Dr. Engeman continues, "is that there is a severe and almost paralyzing ethical problem in this country. Many people dispute this. There are some who do not believe there is a major crime problem; there are some who deny that ethics and crime are related . . . We believe that we can demonstrate that unlawful behavior is in part a result of absence of instruction in individual ethics . . .

"The schools and churches are well situated to teach individual ethical

responsibility, but do not do so. A reform of their ethical education would involve a recommitment to ethical instruction and a retraining of instructional staff."

Benson and Engeman examine the various explanations for America's high crime rate and suggest that while some of these explanations may identify contributing factors, they do not adequately explain exploding crime.

In regard to the popular sociological theory that poverty causes crime, Dr. Benson writes, "Most of the explanations of delinquency and crime are related to poverty or poverty areas. If life in these areas can be improved through better housing, better education, better policing, better employment services, and better health conditions, most sociologists believe that crime would be greatly reduced. The writers are inclined to agree that improved district services would probably help reduce their crime rate . . .

"All of these explanations of delinquency omit the fact with which this book is concerned: the teaching of ethical standards . . .

"Poverty explanations of delinquency do not apply to middle-class crime. This criminal was usually raised in a middle-class area, and was not forced into his crime by a lack of money. If customary sociological analyses do not explain the substantial amount of middle-class crime, there is even more reason to stress

* *Amoral America* by George C. S. Benson and Thomas S. Engeman, Hoover Institute Press, Stanford University, 1975. Dr. Benson, a political scientist, has taught at Harvard, Northwestern, and other universities. He was the founding President of Claremont Men's College. He has held several important positions in the Federal government, the last as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Education. Dr. Benson is presently Director, Salvatori Center at Claremont McKenna College.

Dr. Engeman has taught political science at Scripps College and Claremont Men's College and is now in the Department of Political Science, Loyola University of Chicago. He is the author and co-author of a number of articles on problems of ancient history, political theory and ethics.

ethical education, which is needed for all social and economic classes."

Several surveys show that there has been a substantial decrease in ethical instruction in American schools. Professors de Charms and Moeller, for example, studied fourth grade readers from 1800 to 1950. In 1810, 16 out of every 25 pages included moral instruction. By 1930, this had fallen to one page in 25 and in 1950, it was .06 pages out of 25.

A study made by Parkin of the moral and religious content of 1,291 American school readers from 1776 to 1920, found 100 percent emphasis on moral and religious content from 1776 to 1786, approximately 50 percent emphasis from 1786 to 1825, 21 percent in 1825 to 1880, and only 5 percent from 1916 to 1920.

Dr. Benson cites still another study. This time about child rearing and says, "It was observed that the change in the articles written on the subject reflected the change in general intellectual attitudes. The percentage of topics dealing with various aspects of character and/or personality training in three women's magazines was found to be as follows: 1880, 35 percent; 1900, 31 percent; 1910, 39 percent; 1920, 3 percent; 1930, 24 percent; 1940, 23 percent; 1948, 21 percent." Although interest in this subject had declined and then increased again, after 1930 the emphasis was quite different. It had shifted from character development to concern with personality. Problems of adjustment rather than moral problems were emphasized.

"Until the first World War," states Professor Benson, "ethics was a required course (in addition to chapel attendance) for undergraduates in private liberal arts colleges of denominational background. The texts for these courses can still be found in college libraries . . . Although these books vary in their approach to the true ground for ethics — emphasizing first natural law, then passion, then reason — they all share a common concern for improving the character of students . . .

"In today's colleges and universities, the number of students registered in ethics courses in departments of religion or philosophy is small. The method of teaching ethics has

also changed since the beginning of the century. This change is partially a consequence of the success of positivism in philosophy. Professors like Rawls, who actually teach about what is ethically good, are rare. Often the professors follow such leaders as Wittgenstein, one of the major proponents of linguistic positivism, who has dismissed ethics as a nonsensical discipline."

What caused this decline in ethical instruction in schools and colleges? Dr. Benson identifies several trends. One of these is the First Amendment, separation of church and state, which made religiously based ethical instruction in schools more difficult. "More important, perhaps," he states, "has been the great success of science and its impact in every aspect of our lives. The adverse effect of scientific positivism and the later movement, existentialism, on ethical instruction is obvious: 'positivism and existentialism deny that ethical and value judgments can be justified at all.' (Frankena)

"To measure the impact of scientific positivism on American ethics," Benson continues, "one could study several major figures, including Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, James, or Sumner, in addition . . . John Dewey and the psychologists, especially Sigmund Freud."

He quotes Freud directly, "Ethics are remote from me . . . I do not break my head much about good and evil."

"In America," Benson continues, "Freud's theories were frequently invoked to minimize punishment as a deterrent and to restrict any kind of ethical instruction. Seymour Halleck, in *Psychiatry and the Dilemma of Crime*, charges: '(Our) model of mental illness can be used to encourage the notion that people are not responsible for their own behavior. The equation of sickness with non-responsibility seems to have been generalized to other behaviors, including delinquency. In a society in which people do not feel responsible for their own actions, the criminal adaptation is more easily justified and supported.'

"Paul Roazen, an authority on Freud, stated that in child rearing, 'there was a time in the history of psy-

choanalytical doctrine when the inclination was to view all suppression as negative, all controls of the child as hindrances to his development.' . . .

"Freud has had direct effects on criminology," Dr. Benson continues, "child rearing, marriage counseling, political science, and sociology, as well as education."

"Another significant development in psychology," Benson states, "is behaviorism. J.B. Watson, its founder, attempted to make psychology more scientific. He rejected the introspective methods of the Freudians and turned to the more objective and quantitative methods of the biological sciences, arguing that human behavior is a result of conditioned responses to stimuli, e.g., on a simple level, Pavlov's famous dog. In this view, consciousness is either ignored or denied, so ethical choice is replaced by psychological adjustment . . ."

"While by and large psychologists have tended to oppose conventional ethics, there are some who have taken a positive position towards them. Abraham Maslow's third force psychology has been favorable towards ethics for the sake of individual self-fulfillment. The new school of 'transactional analysis,' discussed in Harris's *I'm OK . . . You're OK*, also argues on behalf of an objective moral order based on the universal importance of human relations — a view which is admittedly similar in many respects to that of Christianity.

"John Dewey, a philosopher of pragmatism," says Benson, "also had a deep and long-lived influence on American ethical education . . . To portray Dewey as an opponent of personal or individual ethics may appear paradoxical. The words morality, habit, ethics appear everywhere in his work. Moreover, he wished to promote what he considered new and just standards of ethical education.

"The net effect of Dewey's philosophy and pedagogy, however, was to foster what we have described as social ethics at the expense of individual ethics . . . Dewey did not teach moral principles because insofar as those principles exist Dewey believed they were changing, and therefore to teach them necessarily limited the individual experience of

the child."

Benson and Engeman also studied religious school curricula. They found that many religious denominations had been profoundly influenced by advocates of situation ethics and behavioral science. "The modern church . . .," writes Professor Engeman, "has, to a large extent, modified its concern with individual ethics. Judeo-Christian ethics has been replaced in the churches' interest by social action and psychological views of individual happiness. In so doing, the churches have followed the intellectual theories coming from the society around them — particularly from the universities. According to these views, individual unhappiness and criminality are consequences of social forces, and are not questions of spiritual or ethical choice. As long as there is racism, militarism, economic exploitation, etc., one should not be surprised — the argument goes — to find criminal reactions to these conditions . . .

"Up until World War II," Professor Engeman continues, "the emphasis on individual ethical responsibility in religious education remained consistently high . . . Since World War II, however, the child-centered curricula of the liberal Protestants, Catholics, and Jews have moved away from the older view of Judeo-Christian ethics. Most significantly, they have posited that sin or criminality is not a product of choice but is socially and psychologically determined."

The authors of *Amoral America* suggest that the problem with more conservative churches is not lack of ethical content, but failure to use more effective teaching methods.

The authors believe that lawlessness and crime is less severe in Europe because European schools still emphasize individual responsibility. "At the same time that the study of individual ethics was being removed from American schools," writes Engeman, "the Northwestern European countries experienced the same intellectual forces . . . However, the impact of these changes was less in Europe than in the United States. No European country followed Dewey's directive against teaching ethics only through the child's ex-

perience in school as fully as the U.S.; Freud was taken much less seriously in Europe than in America . . . Since European countries have no First Amendment to eliminate religion from the schools, there was no excuse for tossing ethics out with religion. Perhaps because the European universities educated a small proportion of the population, university students were better selected and less likely to accept new doctrines as enthusiastically as did Americans . . . Anti-ethical movements in university philosophy departments have not had an impact on the teaching of ethics in schools to the extent they have had in this country."

History provides many examples to show that ethical instruction is related to national performance. One example cited by the authors happened in England. "In the latter half of the 18th century," they write, "and on into the 19th, British life was marked by a high incidence of public corruption and considerable general criminality. The mistreatment of the poor, a political system based on rotten boroughs, the corruptability and inefficiency of British officials in America and in other parts of the British empire, are a few of the familiar manifestations of British decadence during the period. From this low ebb, British life underwent what Karl Frederick has called a recovery which is 'little short of miraculous.' . . .

"What caused this marked improvement in the ethical standards of British public and private life? Historians differ in their interpretations. Some cite the increased wealth generated by the industrial revolution and the democratization of the

society. Others, and perhaps the most influential group, make a persuasive argument for the view that the reforms were brought about by the increased moral conviction of large numbers of British citizens. The ethical teachings of the Wesley brothers, reflected in Methodism, in Thomas Arnold's program at Rugby, and in the English public schools in general, in addition to the writing and the speeches of many lesser known individuals, were major contributors to the change . . . English ethical reform started in the churches, spread to the schools and colleges, and then reached the economic and political institutions."

In conclusion, the authors urge our society to develop programs to increase individual ethical instruction in home, school, church and other social institutions.

Amoral America is an extremely significant book and one that we recommend to everyone who is concerned about the exploding problems of our society.

CHARACTER EDUCATION CORNER

Students at Merwin Elementary School in Covina, California come, for the most part, from low income "blue collar" families. Some are White, others Hispanic, and some from families so poor that their homes lack indoor plumbing.

When Roland Iannone was appointed principal in 1974, discipline at Merwin was very poor and the staff badly demoralized.

Two incendiary fires in addition to considerable vandalism cost more than \$25,000 during the 1974-75 school year. The school building and grounds were very dirty and many walls covered with graffiti.

Dr. Iannone developed a program to restore discipline and improve student conduct. Security was tightened and some of the vandals, many of them previous students from Merwin, were apprehended and required to remove the graffiti and help clean the school yard or go to court.

Here is his description of what happened at Merwin:

"Merwin School embarked on a planned character building program

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eight years ago. Essentially, our program involved building the self-esteem of students in our school who are largely from low middle and low income families.

"We were successful in accomplishing esprit-de-corps using the following and other techniques. We sent 'Merwin Happy-Grams' (post cards) to the homes of students who were successful at some task or who deserved special recognition. Teachers were requested to make at least three positive telephone contacts with parents of their students each week. The principal, too, made three random calls per day just to see how things were going.

"Awards and recognition of all kinds were formalized at awards assemblies; two students from each class were honored with 'outstanding citizen of the month' awards. A principal's honor award was created for students demonstrating exceptional honesty or good citizenship. Attendance awards and a Principal's Honor Roll were also important.

"All staff members agreed to hold students to a strict but fair standard of conduct. Each student received a written copy of the simplified rules and regulations each year. 'Please' and 'thank you,' 'excuse me,' and 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir' became common place. A dress code was encouraged — students were expected to dress neatly and modestly and come prepared to learn. Students were specifically instructed and guided to

behavior patterns that tended to build character.

"Our motto became 'We Care' and our policy was to be firm, fair and consistent in dealing with students and the community. Needless to say, a fine, hard working staff devoted a great deal of effort and extra time to our planned program to educate the 'whole child.'

"A district course of study at all levels and a set minimum proficiency standard gave us academic goals and objectives to achieve. ABM data processing information gave us specific achievement information to analyze and apply, and the means to monitor individual student progress. Program weaknesses were detected by the California Assessment Program (CAP) as well as school and district Criterion Reference Testing. Weaknesses were identified and a planned program to overcome those deficiencies was initiated at the appropriate levels. Teacher-Principal and student interfacing became critical and was carefully monitored and evaluated at all levels.

"The results have been phenomenal. Vandalism was reduced from a high in 1974-75 of over \$25,000 to just over \$500 for the 1981-82 school year. Discipline has improved, and the number of students referred to the principal for disciplinary action decreased by almost 80%. No serious discipline cases have been recorded for the past three years. Suspensions have become rare and paddling non-

existent.

"Academic achievement has increased and generally falls above national norms at all levels each year and usually just below district norms in a school not expected to achieve at such high levels.

"Visitors are challenged to find unhappy kids at school. Attendance for most students is good and fewer chronic absences are noted. Students are noticeably polite and friendly, the grounds and buildings sparkle, and a very warm positive atmosphere generally prevails. One will not find litter at Merwin. The community has become very supportive and protective of the school and recognizes the value of our program.

"Interestingly, the Merwin PTA emergency lunch fund grew from \$50 to \$79 in one year because 'honest' students turned in nickels, dimes and quarters and dollars found on the school grounds. Each such student then received a Principal's Honor Certificate for honesty.

"While we have more to do and higher goals to achieve, we feel justifiably proud of our program so far."

Dr. Iannone has recently started to use the Character Education Curriculum developed by the American Institute for Character Education. Dr. Iannone says that this program "lends itself to our basic thrust at Merwin and helps systematize and structure what we have been doing in a more pragmatic way."



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