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THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

For centuries the Seven Deadly Sins have been cons.idered a quaint artifact of the Middle Ages, useful to medieval scholars but beneath the dignity of sophisticated modern man. Every king and peasant in Christendom used to be able to recite the 1,300= year-old list:. pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and slot h. Ask a high school student today to name them, and he will answer you with a blank stare.

Indeed, the whole concept of sin has faded out of American public life.. In a misguided attempt to protect freedom of religion, courts have outlaw d any teaching in the public schools that smacks of religion, morality, God, or an afterlife. The World Book Encyclopedia does not even list an entry for sin. The result of sin's fall from fashion has been a shift of blame for misdeeds away from the individual to the entire society. While disclaiming responsibility, today's "Me-Generation" seeks the short= term gratification of sexual promiscuity, childlessness,, and material pleasure.

It is encouraging, therefore, to read of a political journalist who is trying to revive the Seven Deadly Sins. In "The Seven Deadly Sins Today" (New Republic Books), Henry Fairlie, a frequent contributor to the Washington Post and the New Republic, discusses the need for returning the notion of sin to everyday American life.

In particular, the Seven Deadly Sins are applicable to modern America bec use they all are forms of selfishness. The main enemy in the book is the present cult of the individual. "Looking at your life through the Seven Deadly Sins takes you out of yourself and places you in a really active.relationship with your neighbors, your friends, your family, your society. That stops you from being selfish," Fairlie explained recently. He comes down a bit hard on jogging and cooking, but he is on target in condemning the pride of today's pseudo-religious self-improvement programs and the lust in singles bars.

"Afte}". the sort of relativism of the last 150 years, culminating in phrases of the '60s like 'everything is relative,' [my readers] are looking for some shared

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absolute values," he added.

Fairlie points out that the concept of sin should liberate rather than intimi date, since it sets an ideal standard of behavior and holds each person responsible for his actions, instead of that nebulous culprit called "society."

"There is something enlivening in this, which reminds us that our lives, to a degree that counts, are always ours to make; that we may still choose to be more whole; thc1.t there is something more a·nd better in us, on which we can call, than we have so far chosen to become. The understanding that we sin is a summons to life," the book states.

Other prominent social critics have advanced Fairlie's ideas in r ecent years, notably psychiatrist Karl Menninger in ·"Whatever Became of Sin?" arid Harvard socio logist Daniel Bel 1. In a 1977 lecture entitled "The Return of the Sacred?" Bell expressed concern over what he calls the "Great Profanation."

The phenomenon of profanation, according to Bell, began in the 17.th century and is characterized by the growth of the idea of an "unrestrained self"; the decline of religion as a restraint on human impulses; and the decline of the belief in Heaven and Hell.

Bell suggests that we are in a spiritual crisis which requires a religious answer, and he has "no doubt" that this answer--a return of the sacred--will soon arrive in world. culture. "The exhaustion of Modernism, the aridity of Communist lif , the tedium of the unrestrained self. all indicate that a long era is coming to a close," he said. "We are now groping for a new vocabulary whose keyword seems to be limits."

Religion and, more specifically, the doctrine of sin are all about limits on self-gratification. Let us hope that, in spite of the Supreme Court's discouragement of public religious expression, the American people will once again recognize the existence of sin and the power it gives us to shape our destinies through free will and individual responsibility.

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