

Review

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Review by: Barry Schwartz

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America's Crisis of Values: Reality and Perception. By Wayne Baker. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005. Pp. xvi+307. \$35.

Barry Schwartz
Swarthmore College

Is there a "crisis of values" in the United States? There is little doubt that almost everybody thinks so. And in this thoughtful and thought-provoking book, Wayne Baker takes this shared perception as a given. His question is whether this perception is accurate. And his answer is yes, but not in the way you might think.

Baker begins the book by refining what a "crisis of values" might mean. It could mean a loss of traditional values over time. It could mean a loss of traditional values in comparison with other societies. Finally, it could mean an increase in irreconcilable moral differences *within* contemporary society. One sees all three meanings at play in the writings of the most dramatic hand wringers of recent years, though it is principally the third meaning that people have in mind when they talk about modern America's "culture wars."

To assess whether this concern about values is justified, Baker relies primarily on data from the distinguished World Values Survey. This survey has been administered periodically since 1981 to citizens in 65 countries spanning the globe. And the data from the survey permit an assessment of the historical (though 25 years is admittedly not a very long time, most proponents of the "crisis of values" thesis would argue that even in that limited period, American values have eroded), the cross-cultural, and the intracultural hypotheses. And in some 63 tables and figures, Baker provides assessments of all three hypotheses. This is what Baker finds:

1. America's values are as traditional today as they were in 1981. Thus, there has been virtually no historical decline.
2. America's values have been and still are among the most traditional in the world. Indeed, the United States is a real outlier when it comes to traditional values in comparison with other economically advanced democracies.
3. Finally, America's social attitudes, cultural values, and beliefs are no more polarized now than they were a generation ago.

Thus, the data suggest, rather strongly, that in all three senses of the "crisis of values" with which the book begins, there is none.

So why, then, is there such an apparent consensus that the United States is in moral crisis? To sketch Baker's answer requires that we look a little deeper into how Baker, and the World Values Survey, classifies values. The World Values Survey identifies two critical dimensions of cultural variation and change: one is a dimension that goes from traditional to secular-rational values; the other is a dimension that goes from survival values to self-expression values. It is on the level of these dimensions that

Baker concludes there is little evidence for a crisis of values. Cross-culturally, the United States (with Ireland) is the most traditional of economically advanced democracies. Historically, American traditionalism has not changed a bit. And though its approval of self-expression is substantial and has increased, it has increased no more than that of scores of comparable societies. However, it is important to note that the United States is virtually unique in its simultaneous commitment to tradition and self-expression, and that these two commitments themselves create conflicts and contradictions.

But, Baker argues, there is a level of value analysis required that goes deeper than the level at which the World Values Survey is pitched. He calls this the level of “moral visions.” And at this level, there *has* been an increase in polarization in the United States in recent years. The particular moral visions being contested are “absolutism” and “relativism.” Between 1981 and 1995, the proportion of “absolutists” in the United States increased from one-third to one-half across age, income, class, and racial groups. So the United States is now split down the middle. Baker is at pains to point out that there is plenty of slippage between moral visions and moral values, so that people with different visions can have the same values (though presumably with different justifications). Nonetheless, the dispute about moral visions takes its toll.

Baker suggests that differences in moral vision are especially significant in the United States, because unlike other nations, which he calls “birth-right nations,” that are built on common ancestry, history, language, customs, religion, and the like, the United States is built on common ideas. So a cultural disagreement about these ideas represents a threat to national identity in the United States that it would not in other societies. What this means is that people in the United States are engaged in a high-stakes struggle, both between and within individuals, to reconcile absolutism with relativism—tradition with self-expression. It is the salience of this struggle, both within and between us, that gives rise to the sense of moral crisis, that induces us to focus on differences and ignore similarities.

This review has only scratched the surface of this deeply provocative book. It raises many questions for further investigation, and it will reward careful study.

License to Harass: Law, Hierarchy, and Offensive Public Speech. By Laura Beth Nielsen. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005. Pp. 225. \$35.00.

Susan Fineran
University of Southern Maine

In her book *License to Harass: Law, Hierarchy, and Offensive Public Speech*, Laura Beth Nielsen provides a provocative overview of offensive