



The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values

By Gertrude Himmelfarb

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Although Himmelfarb concedes that Victorian England was rife with class rigidity, discrimination and hypocrisy, she nevertheless believes Victorian society has much to teach us because it preserved a core of "virtues" such as hard work, self-reliance and deferral of gratification. The compartmentalization of the sexes into separate spheres of activity in that era was more flexible than is generally acknowledged, she argues, pointing to women's involvement in social work, education, government and philanthropy. Professor emeritus of history at the City University of New York, Himmelfarb draws on oral histories, memoirs, newspapers and the writings and personal behavior of William Gladstone, John Stuart Mill, Anthony Trollope, H.G. Wells, Oscar Wilde and others to bolster her arguments. Her challenging study urges liberals and conservatives to move beyond moral relativism in addressing such problems as crime, illiteracy, poverty, welfare and substance abuse.

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From Library Journal

Himmelfarb, professor emeritus of history at CUNY and the author of several works on Victorian England, including most recently *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (LJ 7/91), here contrasts the Victorian "virtues" of respectability, self-help, orderliness, cleanliness, and obedience with today's vague concept of "values." The author debunks the popular perception of Victorians as repressed and materialistic. Instead, according to Himmelfarb, their "manners and morals" created a society that emphasized a strong family life for all classes and gave rise to a prosperous economy and the early feminist and social service movements. Furthermore, the influence of these virtues caused the incidence of illegitimate births and violent crimes to drop significantly and remain low until the 1960s. This provocative and important book is recommended for all academic and large public libraries. ?Kathryn Moore Crowe, Univ. of North Carolina Lib., Greensboro

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From [Booklist](#)

When in 1983 Margaret Thatcher enthusiastically replied, "Oh exactly," to an interviewer's snippy remark that she seemed to approve of "Victorian values," she touched off the heated contemporary discussion of values that luckily has eventuated in this superb reconsideration of Victorian moral attitudes. What we call--thanks to the secularizing influences of Nietzsche and Weber--values, Victorians called virtues. In their minds, those included dedication to family, hard work, thrift, cleanliness, self-reliance, self-respect (which is not similar to modern self-esteem), neighborliness, and patriotism. Drawing on a panoply of the foremost Victorian social critics and commentators as well as historical statistics, Himmelfarb demonstrates that especially English but also U.S. nineteenth-century society was exceptionally socially minded. The working class and the poor strove to live by the same moral standards the middle and even the upper classes observed, and the result was a social order in which schooling spread, incomes rose, outsiders, especially Jews, were assimilated and often admired, women's rights expanded, and crime rates fell--all while urbanization and industrialization boomed and, indeed, demonstrably made England "a more civil, more pacific, more humane society." Neither puritanical nor hypocritical, the moral Victorian era stands in sharp contrast to "de-moralized" post-World War II England and America, as Himmelfarb shows in a long epilogue that ends in hopes for a new reformation that "will restore not so much Victorian values as a more abiding sense of moral and civic virtues." This is intellectual history and historically based argument as good as they get. *Ray Olson*

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