

THE
VIRTUES
OF
LIBERALISM

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INTRODUCTION

Rethinking America's Liberal Tradition

America!
Land created in common,
Dream nourished in common,
Keep your hand on the plow! Hold on!
If the house is not yet finished,
Don't be discouraged, builder!
If the fight is not yet won,
Don't be weary, soldier!
The plan and the pattern is here,
Woven from the beginning
Into the warp and woof of America:
ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.

—Langston Hughes,
“Freedom's Plow”¹

This book issues the summons of Langston Hughes to American liberals: “KEEP YOUR HANDS ON THE PLOW! HOLD ON!” For fifty years now the ideas and policies of American liberalism have been on the defensive, first against charges of communism or socialism, more recently against charges of moral as well as economic apostasy. The time has come to reconsider the ideals that inspired generations of Americans to see the rich potential of political engagement as well as the value of private pursuits, to acknowledge the importance of public deliberation about the meanings of our shared standards of liberty and justice for all. The time has come to proclaim again what James Madison termed the “necessary

mand of theocrats and republicans that individual citizens can find fulfillment only in, and thus must sacrifice themselves for, the good of the church or the state. They conceived of the liberal polity, however, as a legal and moral order necessary not only to protect them from each other and adjudicate their conflicts but also to enable them to achieve their goals. The liberal polity could survive only through the faithfulness of its citizens and their persistent loyalty to it—and to its procedures of resolving disputes through persuasion rather than force—regardless of the difficulties that might arise, which is the meaning of fortitude. Finally, liberals elevated the rights of every citizen over the privileges and preferences of an elite. They conceived of such rights, however, as bounded by the firm command that individuals must render to God and to their neighbors what is their due, which is the meaning of justice.

It would be possible to expand this list of inexact parallels by tracing other standard liberal commitments to those central to the Judeo-Christian tradition. The liberal virtues of law abidingness, honesty, and moderation, for example, echo certain of the commandments handed down through Moses. The liberal virtues of tolerance, respect, generosity, and benevolence likewise extend St. Paul's admonition to the Colossians that they should practice forbearance, patience, kindness, and charity. One might argue that even the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, which Christians understand with reference to their deity, bear more than a faint resemblance to the liberal virtues of trusting others, resolutely resisting cynicism, and attempting to find ways to help others flourish. Of course there are differences, since the desire to shield religious dissenters from persecution helped launch liberalism in the first place, and those who long for religious homogeneity will always be uneasy with the toleration of diversity that liberals champion. But notwithstanding the protests of dogmatists on both sides of the religious-secular divide, the discrepancies between their versions of virtue are no more striking than the similarities.

Given the compatibility between Christian virtue ethics and the virtues of liberalism, it is tempting to draw up a more elaborate or definitive list of liberal virtues, to follow in the footsteps of earlier champions of virtue ethics such as Aristotle and Aquinas. *Some philosophers and political theorists have done just that in recent years.*⁵ But resisting that temptation is essential to the purpose of this book, both because this is not principally a prescriptive but a historical account and because disagreement, deliberation, and experimentation are essential to liberalism, not unfortunate accidents.

Overlooking the frequency and inevitability of discord and the importance of reaching tentative, provisional accommodations between apparently irreconcilable points of view would be false to the history as well as the theory of liberal democracy in America. The essays that follow examine and illustrate how the virtues of liberalism have evolved and how their meanings have altered because of dissent, conflict, and the changes of mind and heart that result. Conceived historically, no static portrait or definition of liberalism would be accurate for all times even in this one place. To cite just three examples, American liberals' ideas

about the desirability of religious and cultural diversity, about the rights and appropriate spheres of activity of women and members of different racial and ethnic groups, and about the role of government in regulating economic and social activity have all developed as new experiences and understandings have transformed old patterns of behavior and belief. That disposition to entertain criticism and accept change, a defining characteristic of liberalism, is itself grounded in the ancient Judeo-Christian virtue of humility.

The diverse and historically shifting virtues of American liberalism derive from various sources, religious and non-religious; they have manifested themselves in complex and changing practices of cultural expression, politics, economics, and social activity. Balancing commitments to popular sovereignty, regulated market exchange, and distinct cultural traditions, American liberals have sought to mediate their differences and maintain their equilibrium with varying degrees of success. The point of this volume is to make clear that, historically, the reconciling and balancing of competing values, which seems so elusive in the polarized culture of the United States at the end of the twentieth century, has been another defining feature of the liberal and democratic traditions in America. *These traditions have not reflected the false dichotomies of our current debates but instead demonstrate the necessity and even the desirability of holding in suspension, and deliberating about the meaning and implications of, values that may seem incommensurable in theory but that inspire practices capable of sustaining and enriching our lives.* The principles we need are to be found right in front of our eyes in the virtues of liberalism: in the deliberate and delicate balancing of freedom against responsibility, of the desire for individual wealth and security against the importance of social equality, and of the genuinely constitutive commitments to religious traditions or other cultural ideals against the awareness of the sometimes incompatible values of other Americans.

The desire to resolve those tensions, or to strike a permanent balance among those conflicting ideals, has been a perennial feature of American culture, but it is a desire we must learn to overcome or at least to keep under control. The yearning for resolution has often sprung from utopian reformers seeking social justice through dramatic social or political transformation. But as the last two decades have demonstrated, such yearnings can as easily emerge from free-market utopians whose dogmatic faith in capitalism leads them to distrust all public authority and to dismiss all invocations of responsibility, equality, and justice as illegitimate intrusions into the otherwise benign workings of the marketplace. The consequences of such capitalist utopian fervor can be as ruinous as the consequences of revolutionary egalitarian ideologies that have trampled individual rights, personal security, and religious faith. Liberalism and democracy go hand in hand, not because they can carry us beyond ideology or beyond history but precisely because *the clear-eyed study of their connections in history can signal not only the dangers of utopianisms left and right but also the fruitfulness of compromise and the value of balance—together with the inevitable frustrations such moderation brings along with it.* As England and France both have demonstrated in re-

