
RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Reformed Protestant, answers the author: the religious strain that has dominated throughout the United States' history, and a primary shaper of the nation's values, either directly or by association. With its "disdain for ritual and liturgy" and emphasis on moral self-determination, reformed Protestantism formed the ideal complement to liberal democracy. (By the same token, 19th-century Protestant Americans' suspicions of Roman Catholicism partly arose from the sense that democratic principles were incompatible with papal edicts.)

The Constitution's commitment to separation of church and state proved decisive in forging a bond between them, says Rabkin. British philosopher David Hume (1711-76), who was much admired by James Madison, feared that disestablishment would evoke civil challenges from "charlatans practising on the passions and credulity of the populace." Eccentric sects did spring up in America after the Revolution, but none of them threatened the Republic. In fact, Protestant evangelicals saw Christianity as "the religion of liberty."

In 1840, a visiting German Lutheran minister scoffed that the typical American Protestant group behaved as if "self-sprung from the skies." By the 20th century, Protestantism's ad hoc character had become a feature of American churches in general. And, despite opposition from strict separationists, the nation remained bent on investing "public purposes with a sacred aura," routinely drawing upon ministers, priests, and rabbis to bless civic events—including sessions of Congress.

The Constitution implicitly recognized, concludes Rabkin, that "in the end our souls can neither be saved nor lost by mere governments." Nor, as it turned out, could religion alone serve America's spiritual ends.

Protecting the Dead

"On Harming the Dead" by Joan C. Callahan, in *Ethics* (Jan. 1987), The Univ. of Chicago Press, 11030 South Langley Ave., Chicago, Ill. 60628.

We should not, as the old adage says, speak ill of the dead. But can our words—or deeds—hurt the dead at all? The law says they can. So do some moral philosophers.

Callahan, an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Kentucky, says that morality is not involved, and should not be invoked. What, she asks, does a person "possess" after his death? He can't take his reputation with him; that, says Callahan, is not something that is part of a person, but is bestowed by the opinions of others. Albert Einstein's reputation, for example, was something Einstein never controlled.

Even the discovery of an unpleasant fact after a person's death does not harm that person. Consider Jones, a prominent scientist. After his death, it is discovered that many of Jones's laboratory results are forged. This increases our knowledge of Jones, yet Jones remains the same person he was during his lifetime. His existence has not been altered by discoveries made after his death.

But don't wills reflect the wishes of the dead? That, Callahan argues, is "loose talk." When we say "Sally must pay her mother's debts," we do not mean that Sally's mother is handing Sally debts from beyond the grave, but

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that Sally's mother's debts, once the property of Sally's mother, have now become the property of Sally. Only if a living heir assumes a dead person's interests—by extending a copyright, paying a debt, preserving a family heirloom—are the dead person's interests preserved.

Even so, Callahan believes that those portions of the law based on the premise that the dead *can* be harmed should be kept. No fine-spun theory of morality is necessary. Living Americans are comforted to know that, through their bequests, they can reward persons or institutions they care about. And, if the legal conceit that a dead person can be protected is also the best way to comfort surviving friends and heirs, then keeping this conceit intact "is exceedingly well justified."

SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Dyslexia

"Dyslexia" by Frank R. Vellutino, in *Scientific American* (Mar. 1987), 415 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

In 1925, American neuropsychiatrist Samuel T. Orton suggested that a problem he termed "lying in the visual system" made otherwise intelligent children perceive letters and words in reverse—*b* for *d* or *was* for *saw*. This, he thought, would also explain why dyslexics persist in "mirror writing" when normal children abandon it after age four or five.

Orton's theory underlies many of the remedial treatments used today, such as optometric training to improve binocular coordination. Vellutino, director of the Child Research and Study Center at the State University of New York, Albany, says these treatments are futile. Far from being a visual disorder, he argues, dyslexia stems from a complex brain dysfunction: the inability to store and retrieve linguistic information properly.

In experiments with second to sixth graders, Vellutino found that dyslexics could copy words accurately even when they misnamed them. Asked to read out each of the letters, they did so—yet still misnamed the words. On the other hand, dyslexics fared no worse than normal readers in trying to reproduce words from an unfamiliar language (Hebrew) after brief exposure. For all readers, in the absence of linguistic associations, Hebrew became an abstract task, like math.

Along with specific word problems, general semantic deficiencies crop up in other tests. Dyslexic children do not seem able to master phonetics. When given a series of meaningless "pseudowords," they cannot sound them out. Nor can they readily recall words just heard; their brains have not "stored" an adequate impression of how the words are formed. Indeed, these children have trouble naming many things: common objects, colors, and numerals. They may stumble, hesitate too long, even say "dog" when confronted with a picture of a cat.

Genetic research may soon unveil the mechanisms behind this strange disorder. Already certain is that males are more apt to suffer from it than females—by ratios of as high as 10 to 1. Twins are more likely to be dyslexic than other children. Researchers at the University of Colorado,