

to his task. A literary critic and author of *A Place at the Table*, he writes neither as a historian, although he is a good one, nor from within the gilded circle of professional theology. He has grown up in the age of fundamentalist ascendancy; he has had an adult religious experience that caused him to join the Episcopal Church, of which he is a knowledgeable and devout member; and, in addition to having read and understood the literature of fundamentalism, he writes readable, at times even elegant, prose.

Bawer offers sophisticated theological and cultural portraits of Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and other Christian Right leaders, as well as their less-known allies and predecessors. In a distinction that at times becomes too simplistic, he contrasts their exclusive fundamentalism (“The Church of Law”) with inclusive liberal Christianity (“The Church of Love”). At a time when nearly everybody regards “liberal” as an epithet, Bawer lauds liberal Christianity as the essence of the Gospel, the kind of religion that Jesus would both recognize and practice because he preached it. This is a passionate, articulate, timely, and utterly useful book.

—Peter J. Gomes

PUBLIC MORALITY AND LIBERAL SOCIETY:

Essays on Decency, Law, and Pornography.

By Harry M. Clor. Univ. of Notre Dame Press. 235 pp. \$32.95

It seems positively indecent to speak of indecency these days. Saying that a snuff film or a rap lyric offends public morality offends the civil libertarian in us, an overdeveloped part of our collective personality. In this tightly reasoned book, Clor reminds us that we still have a public morality and, what’s more, that it is compatible with a free society.

The author, a professor of political science at Kenyon College, argues that our moral codes are rooted in religion, but only in part. Habits of restraint come from two other sources, both of which influenced the American Founders: John Locke’s liberalism and the writings of the ancient thinkers about civic virtue and republican self-government. Protecting life, liberty, and property depends on many things, including “supplementary ethical attitudes and restraints among the public at large.” Where that sup-

plementary ethic needs legal support, “it may be supported—not for the sake of virtue but for the sake of preserving the moral environment that liberty and property need.” Compulsion, then, is necessary to maintain a free society.

In Clor’s view, the trouble with today’s liberal political theory lies in the shift from Locke’s emphasis on the rule of law to a new emphasis on personal autonomy. Libertarians, including John Stuart Mill and Friedrich Hayek, radicalize the liberty principle. They assume—wrongly, in the author’s view—that morals legislation is unnecessary because individuals exercise their freedom wisely. Meanwhile liberal theorists, including Ronald Dworkin, John Rawls, and Stephen Macedo, radicalize the equality principle. While the libertarians take good character for granted, the egalitarians find the very idea of good character paternalistic and obnoxious. Laws curbing prostitution and pornography, for example, “affirm that some ways of life are worse than others,” so they violate the Dworkinian principle that citizens have a right to be treated “with equal concern and respect” by their government.

Clor fits feminist theory into its egalitarian context. Feminists object to pornography because it shows men using women as objects; it “sexualizes inequality,” in Catharine MacKinnon’s phrase. When feminists set out to censor, as in an ordinance passed by the Indianapolis City Council in 1984, they depict pornography as discrimination against women. If explicit materials, no matter how violent or debased, were to treat both sexes equally, feminists would be untroubled. To Clor, pornography does indeed degrade women—but it also degrades everyone it depicts and everyone who watches. It is harmful because it objectifies human sexuality, not because it objectifies one gender and not the other.

Supreme Court jurisprudence on obscenity has largely respected community standards of decency while exempting from censorship serious works of art and literature. The Court, however, is increasingly influenced by contemporary liberal theorists. The author’s mild tone never wavers, but the import of his argument is that public morality hangs by the threads of Justice Souter’s black robe. Thin threads indeed.

—Lauren Weiner