

application of cinema-studies jargon to a decidedly un-touchy-feely business. Sure, studio execs might want to choose their copyright and trademark battles more carefully, and they certainly look like idiots when they go after kids for posting unsanctioned Harry Potter fan sites and the like on the Web. But when MPA producers, in 1997, lost \$66 million in revenues to movie piracy in India, should they really, as the authors suggest, have taken solace in bootleg-viewers' "reception practices recognised as forms of creative labour"? If we didn't know better, we might think that Miller and his pals were just having a little fun with us.

In light of this book, it has been predictable but in some ways perplexing to see Karl Rove and fellow Bush-administration emissaries huddle with Motion Picture Association of America President

Jack Valenti and other screen honchos to devise pro-U.S. and antiterrorist messages. It also twists the brain to see military brass consulting with screenwriters at the University of Southern California in an effort to anticipate terrorist scenarios. Superficially, such developments are understandable. But while Hollywood and Washington may still walk hand in hand, we're a very long way, *Global Hollywood* makes clear, from the Frank Capra *Why We Fight* era. It's hard to tell nowadays whether film is a product that the U.S. government is helping to place or whether America is just another entertainment brand name whose stock global backers are intent on propping up. ♦

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poets have always had a more intimate sense of what reverence is and why we should invite it into our lives. Woodruff explores what poets and other thinkers have said about reverence from ancient until modern times, drawing especially on his knowledge of the ancient cultures of Greece and China.

HUMAN BEINGS ARE POLITICAL animals, and reverence, according to Woodruff,

has more to do with politics than with religion. We can easily imagine religion without reverence; we see it, for example, wherever religion leads people into aggressive war or violence. But power without reverence—that is a catastrophe for all concerned. Power without reverence is aflame with arrogance, while service without reverence is smoldering toward rebellion. Politics without reverence is blind to the general good and deaf to advice from people who are powerless. And life without reverence? Entirely without reverence? That would be brutish and selfish, and it had best be lived alone.

The Relevance of Reverence

BY TOM PALAIMA

Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue

By Paul Woodruff. Oxford University Press, 248 pages. \$19.95

SOMETHING IS MISSING FROM our modern lives, according to Paul Woodruff, and we know it—but we can't identify exactly what it is. Woodruff has a theory: What is missing is reverence.

Reverence? American society prizes the irreverent. When film producer Stanley Kramer asked a motorcycle-gang member—a blue-collar World War II vet—"Well, what are you rebelling against?" he got a true-blue American answer: "Well, what ya got?" Marlon Brando echoed the line in *The Wild One* and became an icon of 1950s irreverence, capturing a spirit that was only to become stronger in the following decades.

As for reverence, it's been either mistaken for a form of phony piety or discarded altogether. The title of Woodruff's new book—*Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*—is thus a bit misleading. Before we can "renew" the virtue of rev-

erence, we have to figure out what it is and then answer the question "Why bother?" Woodruff, a professor of philosophy and humanities at the University of Texas, spends all 248 pages of his elegant meditation helping us find answers.

Proposing a working definition, Woodruff writes that reverence is "the well-developed capacity to have feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the right feelings to have." We recognize reverence not so much when we see it, then, but when we feel it. For example, we may sense that something is amiss in our lives as parents, children, friends, lovers, citizens, soldiers, teachers, and students. Reverence should permeate and hover over our social relationships and actions. And true reverence ultimately resides in the feelings that we cultivate and sustain about the mysteries of life around us.

Compared to philosophers, political scientists, jurists, and religious theorists,

Woodruff is good at drawing subtle distinctions that help us avoid confusing reverence for things it is not. Take the term *irreverence*. Woodruff explains that *reverence* and *irreverence*, at least as we use the latter, are not necessarily opposites and that healthy irreverence can serve the cause of reverence. The qualities that we consider irreverent are really boldness, boisterousness, and being unimpressed by pretension—fine things. "Reverence is compatible with these [qualities] and with almost every form of mockery," Woodruff says. "Reverence and a keen eye for the ridiculous are allies." It is also a mistake to confuse reverence with respect.

Respect is sometimes good and sometimes bad, sometimes wise and sometimes silly. It is silly to respect the pratings of a pompous fool; it is wise to respect the intelligence of any student. Reverence calls for respect only when respect is really the right attitude. . . . A virtue is a capacity to do what is right, and what is right in a given case—say, respect or mockery for an authority figure—depends on many things.

So why bother with “feelings of awe, respect, and shame” or feelings about the mysteries of life? Might such concerns be self-indulgent or suggest a preoccupation with personal enlightenment or spiritual growth that is out of step in our new world of exploding skyscrapers, anthrax in envelopes, religious fundamentalism fomenting violent hatreds, and nightly CNN footage of stealth-bomber fireworks? This is where Woodruff’s distinction that reverence belongs more to community than to religion comes into play.

In the world of politics—using the word in its original sense of how we conduct ourselves as citizens of our societies—we ought to be cautious of extremism in all forms. We ought to restrain ourselves and our leaders from resorting to arrogant behavior and impulsive violence, even in the name of justice; and we need to listen to and think about differing viewpoints, especially those we would otherwise dismiss as “unpatriotic” or downright unpalatable.

Reverence entails good, hard thinking about life and active engagement in it. Because true reverence is not passive, it has always been viewed with suspicion by political and religious authorities interested in maintaining conformity. This explains the obsessive pursuit and punishment of thought criminals in Hitler’s Germany, Mao’s China, Pinochet’s Chile, and even Eisenhower’s United States.

The concept of “virtue ethics” is the machine that drives *Reverence*. “Virtues are sources of good behavior,” Woodruff explains. “Moral rules and laws set standards for doing right, but there is nothing about a rule that makes you feel like following it. In fact, there is something about many rules that makes most people feel like breaking them.” But according to virtue ethics, “a good person is one who feels like doing what is right.... Virtue is the source of the feelings that prompt us to behave well.” Of course, there is a social dynamic to this. Families develop common virtues, as do people who work together. Virtue ethics looks at

“strengths that people develop in communities. Communities, in turn, depend on the strengths of their members.”

Pointing to common threads in ancient Chinese and Greek ideas about reverence, Woodruff concludes that reverence is a universal principle in promoting positive human social behavior. For example, the ancient Chinese notion of the emperor as the “Son of Heaven” is rooted in the belief that society as a whole will be better off if an emperor “has a sense of awe [that] will remind him that Heaven is his superior.” Such an idea suggests that “any of us is better for remembering that there is someone, or Someone, to whom we are children; in this frame of mind we are likely to treat all children with respect. And vice versa: if you cannot bring yourself to respect children, you are probably deficient in the ability to feel that anyone or anything is higher than you.” A parallel notion is embodied in Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, the primary Greek enculturating text about man and his political and economic environment. Universally, then, reverence has to do with power and how we respect whatever power we have in our human actions.

AS WE HAVE RECENTLY BEEN reminded, the effects of social virtues in human history are mainly seen in negative counterexamples. In Western tradition, the earliest and arguably the most famous treatment of the disastrous results that can arise when reverence is disregarded is found in the Greek historian Thucydides, a high-ranking military commander and the father of case-study history. Woodruff analyzes Thucydides’ account of the deliberations, decisions, and actions taken in 416 b.c.e. by the Athenians when they destroyed the neutral island-polis of Melos and slaughtered its adult-male population (the event that inspired Euripides’ *Trojan Women*). Woodruff argues against the traditional interpretation that the Athenian position is that “might makes right.” Rather, this early act of something like genocide re-

sults from a fundamental absence of reverence toward power, on both sides. Athenian leaders assert not that might makes right, but that might makes right irrelevant. The Athenian negotiators—and the Athenian citizenry back home who deliberated upon and directed all decisions—can only conceive of an answer to the Cold War–style tension between Athens and Melos in terms of using their superior military power to assert dominance over a tiny neutral state. The Melian oligarchic leaders lack reverence in excluding most of their citizens from the negotiations and from information about the negotiations, out of fear that respect for the regular ceremonies of organized government will put pressure on them to compromise their own hard-line position.

The relevance of this discussion to the American position as the one remaining superpower in a world of unstable nation-states and powerful subnational groups is clear. But Woodruff’s greatest act of reverence toward the readers of *Reverence* is to refrain from interpreting recent history according to the ideas he discusses. Woodruff stays true to his understanding of the role of the reverent teacher, noting that “a teacher is well advised to be quiet from time to time about even the most ordinary facts, so that students may have the freedom to make those facts their own.”

Reverence is not a simple self-help book, nor is it intended to be a feel-good, or feel-better, philosophical read over cappuccino at Barnes and Noble. It is grounded in Western and Eastern philosophical, intellectual, and literary traditions, and it invites us to figure out for ourselves how its plainspoken lessons about the role of reverence in government, in churches, in the military, in schools, and in families and communities can be applied to the challenges that confront us in our day-to-day lives. ♦

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