

Morality Tales in US Public Life

By [Barbara Nimri Aziz](#)

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Many Americans who think their country is unquestionably the greatest have been chagrined by recent events that brought them to a new low point. The treatment of families seeking asylum at our southern border with forced separation of children from parents, some shipped to distant parts of the country, is shocking, embarrassing and reprehensible. Overwhelmingly, whatever their political leanings, people want that policy reversed. Some blame the Trump administration, others runaway ICE ([Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#)) procedures, others inept management.

Do those gross measures mark the end of what was known as The American Dream? Most Americans are unwilling to see the morality of the policy, but a conservative [British weekly](#) views this immigration fiasco through a moral lens, referring to an “ill-fated moral debasement of American values”. The article attributes that state of disgrace specifically to the current US administration, pointing to the nation’s “moral shortcomings.... under Trump... Though America has experienced many moral corrections, from abolitionism to the civil rights movement, they have never come (to this) emetic moment...”, the feeling of revulsion, it charges. Notwithstanding many Americans’ disgust over the caging and separation of children, The Economist’s invocation of moral standards is largely unvoiced within the USA. Even though morality underlies many of our current woes.

Why is it impolite to speak about moral markers in our society? Maybe morality is simply redundant today. Yet, without a moral compass, we may be becoming lost. Consensus is impossible; so too, any dignified leadership. Anything seems acceptable, evidenced by the ongoing gun violence and unattended massacres, uncontrolled police shootings of Black men and ugly online dialogue.

We’re not talking about sin with its theological connotations. Morals can operate in the secular sphere too, within culture. Ask any parent, journalist or teacher.

Right and wrong is a hard business for anyone to address nowadays, especially in so-called liberal circles. The perceived immorality of the US leader is answered by Robert DeNiro shouting “F..k You Donald Trump”, on stage at the Tony Awards. Is DeNiro exhibiting moral strength by this declaration? Did he reflect on his action beforehand? There were cheers from his audience; but then what? Did the Hollywood star suffer any retaliation? Would DeNiro have made the same declaration against movie mogul Harvey Weinstein or fellow actor Morgan Freeman when their crimes and misdemeanors were exposed? Has DeNiro now become an activist? And is this all his declaration signifies?

And what about Roseanne Barr’s ugly tweet, her racist statement about former White House advisor Valerie Jarrett? Oh that’s different. Is it? Yes, to many of ‘us’, such utterances are

offensive. Yet we are told Barr was already known for her indiscretions and personal attacks. With that tweet, she crossed a line and her show was cancelled. Yet Barr is still sought after by TV hosts and to many she remains a hero.

Everyone seems to be pushing the envelop—to test today’s moral limits. How much can we offend? How wild can we look? How much dare we share of our phone snaps? How much violence can be created and tolerated as entertainment, or art? How much verbal abuse in the name of free speech; how much sexual or racial abuse to get or to keep a job?

The current occupant of the White house is a moralistic man. Yes. Calling others boorish names and winning accolades for his rudeness is nasty and insulting, but at the same time moralistic—to some. Your and my disgust is matched it seems, by others’ applause. Strange times.

All this has me wondering: What is activism? And what’s the relation of political activism to cultural morality? I’m trying to understand this as a student of culture as well as a citizen of a country known for its openness. Can a healthy culture have no moral limits, whether it’s the behavior of its immigration officials, soldiers or celebrities?

We speak about social behaviors as unethical or corrupt, decent or distasteful, respectable or dishonorable, progressive or illiberal (whatever *illiberal* means). Morality itself seems to be absent from our vocabulary, although it surely underlies all these attributes. Is there just too much borderline conduct flowing through our fluid, censor-free culture, that no mooring can contain it?

Perusal of the Moral Monday campaign of [Rev. William Barber](#) started my reflections on morals. Moral Monday evolved into [The Poor People’s Campaign](#) (PPC): A National Call for Moral Revival led by Barber. [Bruce Dixon](#) writes critically of Barber, faulting him for blaming everything on immoral persons and policies, on lack of moral commitment. Barber calls for a cleansing of America with a “massive moral rest”, a “moral resistance”.

“The problem”, Dixon maintains, “is that labeling your political opponents, their leaders, their misguided values and their persons as “immoral” is never a persuasive political tactic. It might make those already on your side feel nice and comfy to know they’re all moral and the other guys are not”.

Dixon makes a worthy point. Especially today, when Americans are more aware than ever of increasingly economic, social and ideological polarization. So-called liberals have become sacrosanct about their own access to ‘truth’ while so-called conservatives, angry at how they are regarded and maligned, aggressively promote their own truth.

Let’s not forget how yesterday’s immoral activists are later sanctified. Behavior (e.g. homosexuality) once attacked as sick and immoral eventually becomes codified into law. Our most esteemed American (moral) leader Martin Luther King Jr. was for many years vilified; then, when King moved beyond domestic injustices and called the American war in Vietnam immoral:- well, that was unpatriotic which in some circles is treasonous. That charge was leveled at another memorialized leader, Malcolm X. He crossed a moral line when he defined Black Americans’ struggle for justice as not their civil right, but their ‘human right’. In that declaration Malik Shabazz (X) challenged American moral standards.



During that same era when cultural standards were in flux, as they are today, and when military conscription was in force, boxing champion Muhammad Ali refused to be drafted into the US military to fight against Vietnamese: “Shoot them for what? They never called me Ni..er; they never lynched me...never set dogs against me...”, he argued. Ali’s stand so challenged American morals that he was stripped of his boxing titles and banned from boxing- punishment hard to fathom today.

Or is it? Ali’s now forgotten moral stance is in my view comparable to football star Colin Kaepernick’s decision to place a knee on the ground instead of a hand on his heart as others do for the US national anthem. The moral principle on which he acted - injustice, specifically police brutalization of Black and Latino citizens-was eclipsed in the ensuing controversy. (In time, it will become enshrined in US history.)

Try to put yourself in Kaepernick’s position leading up to his declaration. He felt compelled to speak, somehow. Did he consult others-his religious guide, his family, fellow players? Did he ask others to join him? Did he consider the repercussions? What a supreme moral act! It made Kaepernick a hero for many (including this non-football fan); [he was Amnesty International’s 2018 Ambassador of Conscience](#). Meanwhile he was fired from his job, and, I would argue, in its moralist retort, the National Football League banned players from ‘taking a knee’ in public. Although we don’t hear any charge of immorality against Kaepernick, some call his action unpatriotic- a grave allegation in the USA. Kaepernick himself, accepting the AI award, invokes moral issues behind his action, just as Ali did in his defense after his banishment from boxing in 1966.

That the names of music, sports and film celebrities come into our discussion of activism and morality may not be accidental. Favorable or not, celebrity is where morality today is defined and disseminated. Author Peter King has 4.8 million followers; actor Anne Hathaway has 12+ million Instagram fans; Sean Hannity’s FB friends may exceed those numbers. Then there’s The Donald. And don’t forget what his celebrity led to.

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Aziz is a veteran anthropologist and radio journalist, also author of [Heir to A Silent Song: Two Rebel Women of Nepal](#), published by Tribhuvan University, Nepal, and available through Barnes and Noble in the USA. She is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research.

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Articles by: [Barbara Nimri Aziz](#)

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