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Values

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Reflections on Values

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By Lawrence N. Jones

Initial reflection upon the intriguing subject of values in a changing society reveals the importance of clarifying the premises upon which that reflection is based. For example, what is a value; what society among the various societies is one focusing upon; and what is the role of the individual in the process? Are values socially determined, relative to individual preferences, ordained in the very order of things and therefore having a validity quite apart from individual or group experience? There are values which have a kind of eternal verity which must be tested in a changing society. But do not values also change?

Values are "goods" or the ends towards which actions are directed. Values are inherent in beliefs, i.e., a set of related ideas (learned and shared) with some permanence, and to which individuals or groups exhibit some commitment. Values are derivative of one's or a community's beliefs about the self and other human beings, about communities or societies, about institutions, and about religion, God or gods.

Values may be implicit or explicit. That is, they do not have to be stated or committed to writing to be effective. The real test of values is how they are honored or ignored in decisions that are made by institutions or conducting one's life. Values are not mutually exclusive, they may be in conflict and frequently require persons or groups to choose between relative goods over clear choices of right and wrong. Nevertheless, every decision or action involves an implicit or explicit choice among values.

Values change as societies or aspects of societies change. For example, values may be affected by changes in technology, in medical practice, in science, in religious developments, in economic developments and circumstances, in political systems. Values are reflected in institutional change—the change in the institution will embody changes in values. And frequently changing values in the larger society do change institutions.

In recent years there has been increasing concern with values in our society, precipitated by the rapid changes that have been taking place in moral norms. Prior to the 1960s one could anticipate that the values which were inherent in one's world view were eternally valid—or at least were valid for one's generation. Out of the counter-culture of the 1960s came influences which changed our views of marriage, the family, vocation, self-development, and our perceptions of institutions. And the growing disillusionment over the Vietnam War, distrust of public officials, the absence of leaders who could lead by moral force, led to a declining confidence on the part of persons of all ages in their ability to assert the eternal verity in what they believed or what was good and right.

One clear result of the changing values was a changed expectation of institutions which involved a shifting of focus from the expressed value commitments to a careful weighing of performance and a critical examination of systematic violations of espoused values. Concern for individual rights, for the rights of various ethnic or sex groups, for the quality of life available within institutions, and a readiness to challenge established authority irrespective of the deference previous generations had shown all were hallmarks of this changed climate.

When it was clear that it could no longer be assumed that values were being ingested with the "mother's milk," so to speak, questions began to emerge as to how values could be transmitted. Three basic approaches have been suggested.

The first is by indoctrination and is reflective of the biblical injunction to "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart
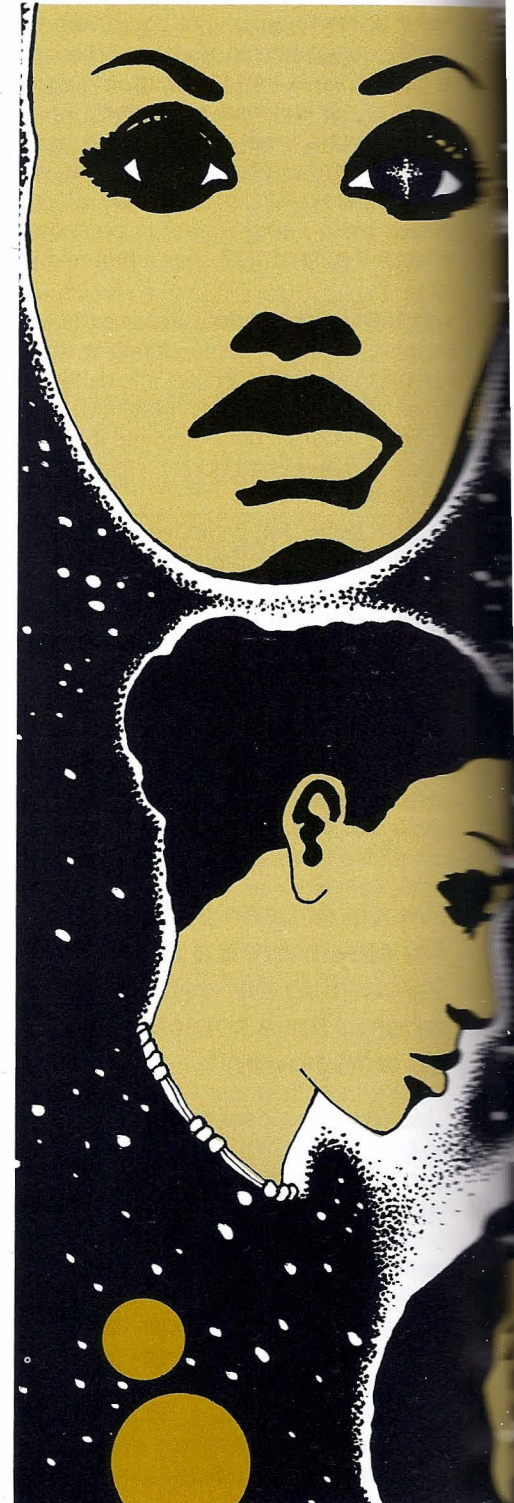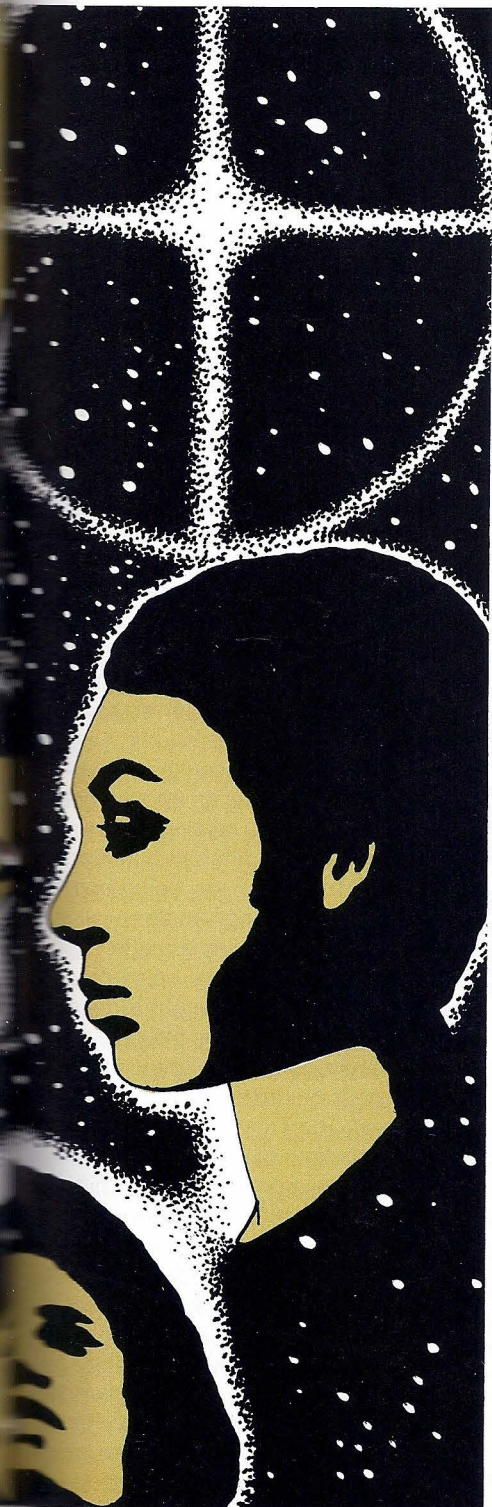
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from it." The indoctrination model seeks to teach values defined by the society as socially valid by a kind of reward and punishment psychology. It is the method used most frequently in families.

The second approach is that of seeking to enable persons to learn to make decisions through self-observation and analysis. This process, which is known as value clarification, places the ultimate responsibility for decision making on the individual.

The third process offers hypothesis that there are stages of moral development during which values may be taught through the examination of situations of moral conflict and through dialogue, with the assumption that there are indeed eternal moral principles which are not subject to change as are mores and societal norms. ["New Trends in Moral Education," *Face to Face,* p. 18ff.]

It is apparent from this brief discussion to which I am indebted in large measure to Professor Peter Scharf of the University of California at Irvine, that each one of these methods is informed by *a priori* judgment concerning the nature of values. The indoctrination model is based on the assumption that a society defines what is valid for it, then proceeds to transmit these to its youth.

The second method assumes that in a pluralistic society values are largely matters of personal opinion—the individual "pays his or her money and takes his or her choice."

The third process, denominated "developmental learning as moral education," rests on the assumption that there are values whose rightness is rooted in philosophic judgments and whose ethical principles ought to be universal.

In this clearly complex landscape of value theory and pluralism concerning how best to transmit values, the question of how one tests values is not a simple one. One thing is clear, there must be a self-conscious delineation of values being sought or appropriated. The clearest test is the degree to which these values are reflected in individual actions, in institutional policy decisions, and in social policy decisions.

Another test of values is the process invoked in prioritizing values, when several "goods" are in conflict. For example, educational goals and objectives are often sacrificed to budget constraints. Senior faculty members are given priority over junior faculty in retention—often in complete isolation from the impact upon the educational values being sought. An analysis of student discontent in recent years will reveal that a conflict in the priority of values lies at its root. Students may emphasize housing conditions while the administration seeks funds to enrich curriculum. Students may desire the retention of certain faculty and administrators while decision makers may see the necessity of acquiring persons with more competencies and overall effectiveness.

Similarly, the values which students and faculty bring to institutions are frequently in conflict with the values of the institutions, and these differences may adversely affect the educational process or even coerce the appropriation of values and life styles which are alien to the basic intent of the founders or the charter. The pressure of politics and internal power plays may also alter or compromise the institution's historic value affirmation.

Whatever *ostensible values* an individual, an institution, or a society may affirm, the *actual values* being held are reflected in decisions that are made, in actions that are taken, and in the range of values that are considered in the "value-choosing" process. Whether values are thought to be eternal, relative, or purely matters of individual preference, the ancient adage still holds—"actions speak louder than words." □