A lost virtue

by Barbara Brown Taylor in the April 24, 2002 issue

Reverence: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue. Paul Woodruff. Oxford University Press, 248 pp., $19.95.

In some parts of the country, the Ten Commandments make front-page news. Where they are already posted in schools and courtrooms, local authorities refuse to take them down. Where they have not yet been posted, those same authorities vote unanimously to display them, publicly defying the American Civil Liberties Union to do anything about it. One north Georgia county recently announced that three new plaques would be installed in the courthouse: one engraved with the Ten Commandments, one with the Lord's Prayer, and one blank plaque "to stand for all of the other religions."

The general idea seems to be that the removal of religion from public life has resulted in the moral breakdown of society, and that the best medicine for broken families, communities, schools and governments is a strong dose of religious belief. Which religious belief? As the unengraved plaque so poignantly attests, there is only one real candidate. Those who do not stand in the Judeo-Christian tradition are blank slates, along with their beliefs.

Thus this vaunted solution is divisive from the start, and even more so as the Asian population of the United States swells each year. Meanwhile, it is no solution at all for those who profess no faith, and who are weary of explaining that their disinterest in religious values does not mean that they have no values at all. Yet the one thing that most of us can agree on is that some--if not most--of our social structures are in trouble.

Our economic disequilibrium feeds our fear of one another. Our confidence in our leaders is tentative at best. Our families, our classrooms, our courts and our churches are all showing the strain of rapid change in a world where individual good has become the best kind, and market values have eclipsed all the rest. If the Ten Commandments are not the solution, then what is?

While Paul Woodruff's new volume is not a fix-it book, he clearly lights a different path through the woods. In his extended meditation on the lost virtue of reverence, he suggests that feelings affect our lives far more deeply than beliefs do. "Moral rules and laws set standards for doing right," he says, "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."

Virtues, on the other hand, supply people with the feelings that prompt them to behave well. Courage is not a rule, any more than wisdom or justice is. To post a list of such virtues on a courthouse wall would raise more questions that it answered, since virtues are not instructions but "habits of feeling" cultivated in community over time. Virtues are hard to learn, in other words, and just as hard to forget, since they dwell not in the mind but in the character.

As a professor of humanities at the University of Texas in Austin and a widely published translator of Greek classics, Woodruff is an able guide in the realm of virtue ethics. The virtue that interests him most is reverence, which sustained the ancient cultures of Greece and China but which has vanished so completely from our own culture that to call something "irreverent" is to pay it a kind of compliment. To Woodruff's credit, he offers no simple definition of the virtue he commends. He requires an entire book to describe it, but says that reverence begins "in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control--God, truth, justice, nature, even death."

As he goes on to describe the roles that ceremony, community, benign hierarchy and humility play in the cultivation of reverence, it becomes clear why this is a lost virtue in our own time. On the whole, we North Americans are not a people who wish to be improved by our limitations. We much prefer to eliminate them. Since reverence is the virtue that keeps human beings from trying to act like God, Woodruff says, the cost of our irreverence is high. Everything from domestic violence to environmental degradation may be seen as a failure of reverence--not to mention the events of September 11.

Woodruff spends a fair amount of time in this book pointing out that reverence and religion are not the same thing. Whereas the feelings appropriate to reverence are respect, awe and shame, he says, the feelings cultivated by many religious groups tend more toward certainty and superiority. This allows their members to do

dreadful things to one another in the name of religion, which becomes the very opposite of reverence. "If you desire peace in the world," Woodruff writes, "do not pray that everyone share your beliefs. Pray instead that all may be reverent." Will someone please print that on a couple of million T-shirts to hand out at religious events around the world?

This "bare reverence," which transcends all formal systems of religious belief and practice, also offers a bridge between them. Truly reverent communities of faith--that is, those that are aware of their own limitations and therefore open to the gifts of others--will have more to talk about than those that secure their own high ground by overidentifying with God. "Reverence requires us to maintain a modest sense of the difference between human and divine," Woodruff writes, although he goes on to stress that belief in God is not required for reverence.

The principle object of reverence, he says, " is Something that reminds us of human limitations," so that a scientist may be as reverent toward the truth as a believer is toward God, and a person's reverence in nature as virtuous as reverence in church. Indeed, Woodruff's book is filled with stories from every arena of lived experience, as he tracks reverence through classrooms, voting booths, redwood forests and string quartets. By his last page, he has bridged not only religions and cultures but also academic disciplines and time. To read this small book is like sitting in on a master class taught by someone who is as at home on the planet as he is in Plato's mind.

But Woodruff's chief concern is neither to educate nor to entertain. Rather, he seeks to raise up a forgotten virtue that holds promise for the future of human life on earth. Without reverence, he says, things fall apart. Families suffer. Governments suffer. Creation suffers. Furthermore, there is no going back to a time--even an illusory time--when one religion's rules were enough to save the world.

"Members of a modern society do not all worship together," Woodruff observes, "and some do not worship at all, so we need to look for reverence in surprising places. Otherwise we may truly lose the ability to bind ourselves together as a society through common virtues." Learning to share bare reverence with people who do not share our faith may turn out to be the most important thing any of us can do, both for ourselves and for all that we revere.