

**Book Review – Public Morality and the Culture Wars: The Triple Divide,
by Bryan Fanning.**

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Bryan Fanning's *Public Morality and the Culture Wars: The Triple Divide* is an ambitious scholarly undertaking that meticulously navigates the intricate web of contemporary societal divisions around public morality. Fanning argues that certain social values and laws in contemporary Western societies, specifically English-speaking democracies, are rooted in unspoken and deeply ingrained beliefs about human nature, as well as in the rights and responsibilities of the individual. These beliefs are evident in ongoing debates related to issues such as censorship, abortion and LGBTQ+ issues, as Fanning shows.

The book explores how, over time, moral understandings have developed and become implicated in law, politics, social norms and more. It develops the central argument that particular values about human nature, personhood, rights and responsibilities hold significant influence. They are not a thing of the past, but rather have developed and adjusted to our contemporary context. Additionally, Fanning argues that the beliefs upon which moralities are based can be sorted into three major and conflicting types or streams, although they sometimes form alliances in addition to oppositions. The first type includes conservative views often based on Christian understandings of personhood. The second type involves classically liberal beliefs in the individual. The third type is seen as progressive, advancing ideas about the socially constructed nature of the self. Understanding how these beliefs continue to shape social and political conflicts adds an important perspective to sociological studies on morality, law and social policy.

Fanning provides a clear exploration of how moral understandings have manifested in societal structures and practices over the past two centuries, as well as in recent decades. He explores various contemporary debates on contentious issues, demonstrating how these debates shape moral politics and practices. The first chapter illustrates how advocates of the different types of moralities and beliefs have historically sought to impose their views on society and culture. Here, Fanning lays the groundwork for the subsequent discussions by examining how different belief systems have historically sought to frame society through their morals. He traces the evolution of different perspectives on moral thought throughout the subsequent chapters.

In the second chapter, the focus turns to the enduring influence of the Ten Commandments and the profound impact of St Augustine's writings, particularly *The City of God*. Augustine's negative view of human nature and his advocacy for coercive governance in the face of sin are explored in depth, highlighting how these ideas have shaped conservative perspectives. The third chapter juxtaposes Augustine's ideas with those of Rousseau, emphasising the contrast between their views on human nature and societal corruption. Rousseau's belief in the innate innocence of individuals and the corrupting influence of external forces lays the groundwork for later critiques of oppressive cultural structures.

Chapter four delves into liberalism, free speech, and intolerance, with a focus on John Stuart Mill's seminal work on individual liberty. Fanning examines the tension between protecting individual freedoms and guarding against the 'tyranny' of the majority, as well as contemporary challenges to the liberal tradition. In chapter five, the discussion shifts to religion, prohibition and censorship, exploring how theological beliefs have influenced temperance movements and debates over censorship. Fanning highlights unusual alliances between conservatives and feminists on issues like pornography, emphasising the complexity of these debates. Chapter six examines civil religion and its potential for intolerance and exclusion, drawing on Rousseau's concept of a universal civic religion. Fanning warns of the dangers of coercive public morality and the stifling of diversity in the pursuit of a uniform societal ideal. In the subsequent chapters, Fanning further delves into the emergence of unexpected alliances between 'conservatives' and 'liberals' against 'progressives'—Fanning's words, in line with previous scholarship on public morality—on certain issues, with some advocating for the enforcement of their values through law and other structures and practices that enforce public morality.

The seventh chapter navigates the contentious debate surrounding abortion, exploring the diverse perspectives of secular and religious, conservative, liberal and progressive thinkers. Fanning provides a sensitive and wide-ranging analysis of this complex issue. He navigates the historical, social, and philosophical dimensions that shape perspectives on abortion within the triple divide of conservative, liberal and progressive beliefs. The chapter scrutinises how these moral frameworks influence the ongoing debates surrounding abortion, highlighting the clash of values, rights, and individual autonomy. Fanning achieves a nuanced analysis of how different belief systems contribute to the polarisation of abortion discussions, shedding light on the complexities that emerge when moral convictions intersect with legal and ethical considerations. This chapter serves as a crucial exploration of a contentious issue within the

broader context of the culture wars, offering readers a deeper understanding of the diverse moral landscapes that underpin attitudes toward abortion in contemporary societies.

Following the chapter on abortion debates, Fanning explores debates on sex differences and gender identities, tracing the evolution of feminist thought and contemporary discussions on LGBT+ issues in the eighth chapter. Finally, in the concluding chapter, Fanning reflects on the future of debates on public morality, noting the enduring influence of both religious and secular ideologies. While liberals advocate for individual moral autonomy, conservatives and progressives alike continue to seek to enforce their values on society. The author cautions against dismissing religious influences on public morality and calls for a nuanced approach to navigating these complex debates.

Fanning's book contributes to an interdisciplinary understanding of contemporary debates, drawing on concepts and theories from sociology, but also law, psychology and history. This is crucial for studies on (public) morality—as people's moral understandings find their way into all these domains. The book uncovers the underlying assumptions of opposing positions, contextualising them, and providing readers with a comprehensive overview of issues that often have long histories and multiple phases of political and/or legal developments. Taking a chronological perspective and tracking moralities temporally as well as thematically is an interesting approach which highlights how moralities continue to underlie various debates.

However, the categorisation of the actors Fanning studies into three major types—conservative, liberal, and progressive—although a convenient framework, risks homogenising diverse perspectives within each category. The book tends to present these belief systems as monolithic entities, potentially overlooking the intricate and internal variations within conservative, liberal or progressive thought. Such generalisations might oversimplify the complexity of individual viewpoints and hinder a more nuanced understanding of the intricate interplay between moral values and cultural conflicts. Overall, Fanning's analysis feels more philosophical and theoretical than sociological and might perhaps be expanded on by additional empirical work. Despite this, the book remains a valuable contribution to the interdisciplinary discourse on contemporary debates, provided readers approach its categorisations with a critical awareness of the dynamics around issues such as abortion and same-sex marriage, and how particular discourses on culture wars sometimes further fuel societal polarisation.

All in all, *Public Morality and the Culture Wars: The Triple Divide* offers a thought-provoking and insightful analysis of the triple divide—and its mutually constituted and constitutive nature—that characterises public morality and the culture wars in contemporary contexts. The book is an invaluable resource for students and scholars interested in morality

issues and relevant theories, particularly when trying to grasp the multitude of contemporary political formations that these currently shape.

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