1985


Paul Peachey

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol5/iss4/5
East and West in this collection signifies, not the antipodes which Kipling believes will never meet, but the schism in European civilization. While the concern over human rights today is global in scope, the concept and language are European in origin. Ironically, so are the disagreements which impede the growth of global consensus on human rights. The differing conceptions of human rights in the "socialist" societies of Eastern Europe and the "pluralist" societies of the West (western Europe, North America) provide the setting for this symposium.

The editors have assembled eight essays, five from eastern Europe (Hungary, Poland, USSR), with the remaining three and the editors' introduction from the US. Only one, however, is by a Soviet-style non-Christian Marxist, this one dealing only indirectly with human rights issues. While the differing conceptions are variously reflected, the concern for political rights in the West, an "encounter" hardly occurs. Yet the assembly of even this limited collection was no mean feat, a fact which simply underscores the political connotations of the differing conceptions.

Of particular interest is Yuri Zamoshkin's critique of the crisis in American culture over the individualistic "American dream," an essay paired here with a discussion by the present reviewer of person and society issues in the Soviet/American encounter. Zamoshkin, professionally a sociologist in the Soviet Institute for the USA and Canada (Moscow), leads a team of experts in the study of American life, culture, and politics. The Institute is an important resource in the
background of Soviet policies vis-a-vis the U.S. The Zamoshkin article, abstracted from a book-length monograph on personality in contemporary America, provides important clues on how Soviets are deciphering the US. Beyond that, however, the analysis is challenging in its own right, because it draws attention to perspectives likely hidden to most of us, perspectives with which many in the end will disagree.

Dean Makkai of the Reformed Theological Seminary in Debrecen, Hungary, briefly explores three roots of modern human rights theories in medieval Europe, and then traces the impact of the Protestant Reformation on the evolution of human rights in Hungary. Three professors at the Catholic University in Lublin, Poland, Stanislaw Kowalczyk, Joachim Kondziela, and Wladyslaw Piwowarski, offer brief but informative contributions. Professor Kowalczyk essays the possibilities of Christian-Marxist dialogue concerning human rights. Professor Kondziela places the ideological polarity into historical context, interpreting the conflict between equality and freedom as "the dilemma of modern civilization." Finally Professor Piwowarski identifies the manifestations of pluralism in socialist Poland.

The theologically informed reader will likely find the final and longest essay to be the most useful. The junior editor joins Agnes Cunningham and Donald Miller in exploring the ground of human rights in "an ecumenical theology." The 1970s saw a great deal of theological work on human rights, following the debates of the 1960s on the two covenants, the one on Civil and Political Rights and on Social, Economic, and Cultural Rights. They draw on the works of three confessional commissions, one Roman Catholic, one Lutheran, and the third Reformed. Antinomies in the Biblical tradition underlie important nuances among
these several approaches, thus inviting ecumenical treatment. An assessment of their effort will be left to others.

The one exception to the Eurocentric scope of this number of Soundings is Max Stackhouse's essay on "Theology, history, and human rights." Delivered originally at a theological forum in India in 1982, it makes at least passing reference to non-Western traditions. Much of the discussion on the global scale still lies in the future.

A hopeful note is sounded by Professor Kowalczyk. We are accustomed to the sharply profiled lines that appear from time to time in the relations of Church and State in Poland. But Kowalczyk discerns movements on both sides that at the same time broaden the basis for dialogue. The postwar interest in Marxist humanism, with important implications for individualism, can be cited on the Marxist side. Meanwhile "postwar Christian reflection began to emphasize more strongly its social and communal dimension, as concerns both existence and value" (p. 166).

Much, perhaps most, of the discussion about human rights has been theoretical and polemical—writers and task groups making a case or developing a rationale. The evolution of varying concepts of human rights have also been treated in terms of intellectual history. But we know far less about the relationships between intellectual and social evolution and history. To what extent have ideas of "rights," whether individual or social, led, to what extent followed and reflected, the development of society? How far in advance of certain stages of societal development can more advanced rights be introduced or demanded? Important policy decisions turn on these questions. By implication, the subtitle of this collection draws attention to this set of problems:
human rights in religious and social context. One can only hope that this symposium will have been an auspicious beginning.

Paul Peachey
Catholic University of America
Washington, DC