Creeds, Society and Human Rights: A Study in Three Cultures

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MAX L. STACKHOUSE. CREEDS, SOCIETY AND HUMAN RIGHTS: A STUDY IN THREE CULTURES

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The purpose of this substantial study is twofold. First, it is a comparison of the concept and practice of human rights in three diverse societies: American, East German, and Indian. Second, it is an argument for the fundamental place of religion (or its subspecies, ideology) in determining the theory and conditioning the practice of what it means to be human in society, and for the particular conciliar-Puritan-ecumenical Christian religion, chastened by liberal insights, as a soil in which human rights can adequately grow. It is therefore not in the first place about human rights at all, but about the social and spiritual dimensions of these societies in their interpersonal, associational and collective relations as they express an understanding of the meaning and direction of human life. Rights--and duties, responsibilities and mutual commitments -- emerge from this context.

The three societies are each examined in two ways: first in cross-section -- on a grid one axis of which moves from the material to the ideational, the other from the interpersonal to the collective -- then historically, showing the developments that made them what they are. Nevertheless they are not symmetrical, either in substance or in the way they are handled. The treatment of what the author calls the "western revolutionary tradition" clearly sets the theme. Rooted in Biblical insights and continuing the cause of the Catholic conciliar movement, the Calvinist Reformed tradition -- especially its free-church side -- built into society the right of free participation by voluntary groups to worship God and follow God's calling in the world. The central concept of social organization became covenant, a form of social commitment and
responsibility at once discerned, and affirmed, voluntary and objectively real, individual and social. Rights are based on the transcendence of God, in the freedom which God gives in the covenant relationship, and in the covenant life of the church which informs, without identifying with, human contracts, agreements, constitutions and forms of order. Because of the transcendence of God, government must be relative and pluralistic. "The godly state is a secular state".

This theme the author finds to be in counterpoint to the individualist assumptions of liberalism fathered by John Locke, with its self-evident freedoms based on reason and experience. They form a synthesis and they need each other to save liberalism from a shallow utilitarianism and to save faith from an arbitrary understanding of the word of God for the world. This synthesis works as a ferment in western society toward more inclusive human rights and toward the expansion of responsible group life, but it is threatened by the impersonal and isolating forces of technology and economic power. Modern technological society is "eating up its ideological capital."

The Marx–Leninist society of East Germany forms a contrast to this, but not a complete one. Here the author moves from participant to perceptive observer, and from a society that has organically grown to one whose ideological system has been imposed by conquest and is inwardly resisted by the traditional culture of the people. The ideology, which he sees as increasingly a religion-substitute, is clearly dominant, and its policies are well described as they interact with traditional German institutions in education, culture, law, family, medicine and technology. The picture is informative, the more so as it is filled out with personal experience. The interplay between ideology and tradition in education
and culture is especially well portrayed. The impact of Leninist law on the family is also illuminating. The chapter closes with a picture of the somewhat confused relations between the two religious forces at work: the Marx-Leninist Party and the predominant Lutheran Evangelical Church.

There are, however, problems with the picture Stackhouse presents here. This writer would suggest two. They are both rooted in his effort to draw a predominantly German line of intellectual history from Luther and Machiavelli through Rousseau to Hegel, Marx, and the present Socialist Unity Party of the German Democratic Republic. The thread of this history is the separation of the private from the public and the search in the public sphere for an absolute order which carries its justification in itself and dismantles the judgment of the transcendent. One can make such a case, but it also distorts current reality in at least two ways.

First, one can make a case for a connection between Luther's suspicion of worldly order and reason as corrupt like all that is human, and the Marxist suspicion of moral absolutes, including rights language, as the ideology of possessing classes. One can move from Machiavelli's political cynicism or from Rousseau's romanticism to the Marxist bureaucracy of the G.D.R. Hegel's dependence on a Lutheran ethos and his philosophical ancestry to Marx are clear. But dependence on this line leaves out some fundamental influences which have made East German society what it is today. Luther not only opened the way for a strong bureaucratic state. He was responsible for an ethos of official integrity and the rule of incorruptible law within that state, of personal honesty and vocational dedication throughout the society which has held Germany together despite all that has happened to it. The fever
of Nazism shook it to its foundations but did not destroy it. Resistance
to Hitler was rooted in it. The confrontation of this ethos with Marx-
Leninism: concern for truth vs. ideological thought; responsible
vocation vs. the demands of total planning; family integrity vs.
political solidarity; impartial justice vs. "socialist legality"; here
is where the real drama of the East German struggle is to be found.

Second, there is no doubt that Karl Marx was a German; Leninism in
its present East German form however is hardly a native German
phenomenon. There has been and is a German Marxism. It runs from
Lasalle through the Social Democratic Party under Kautsky (Lenin's "renegade"), Ebert, Ernst Reuter and Willi Brandt. It is embodied in
creative minds like Habermas and Bloch. But the Socialist Unity Party
does not express this. To understand its history one must go by way of
Lenin and the Russian revolution, the ideology and policies of Stalin and
their later modification in Soviet society. This tradition is expressed
in the German language again, and has developed certain German quirks --
among them a penchant for ideological and bureaucratic rigidity -- but
there is little in it that is originally German. Nevertheless, of
course, the social situation of Germany, divided between two worlds, the
persistence of the Prussian ethos, and the active witness of the
Evangelical Church do make the German encounter with Marx-Leninist
ideology and power different from that in ethnically and culturally more
self-contained societies. Some of these differences Stackhouse helpfully
observes and records as he describes a country in structural and
conceptual uncertainty.

Stackhouse's third society is India. His description of it is the
most eloquent in the book. Here is no western rebellion, but a genuinely

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different traditional society rooted in caste and family, a much more complex and flexible system than we usually understand, and exuding a sense of cosmic order that dwarfs history and change. India is in the midst of modernization and development of course, but the author presents the picture of a deep and tough texture of values and social organization that turns even Mahatma Gandhi and Pandit Nehru into episodes, and turns economic development and secular democracy into a secondary phenomenon more of interest to the minorities of Christians and Marxists than to the masses. In the Hindu renaissance this society has moved to absorb these changes, but rights remain related to place and status in society, not to person as such.

This picture contrasts with that which we so often hear from Indians themselves - intellectual Christians or Marxists as most of them are. They might recognize it, but the difference would be one of emphasis, or perhaps of faith. This raises a deeper question to the whole of Stackhouse's study. Christian conviction plays a strong role in it. His conclusion is that freedom "finally has no metaphysical foundation either in Marxism-Leninism or in Hinduism" because there is in them no transcendent God to judge and to redeem. Rights are born in the continual relativization of human righteousness and power and the continual reform of human institutions which occurs in freedom under that transcendence. But in the sections on East Germany and India the actual efforts of the churches to bear this witness are too little described. In the East German paradigm, graphically drawn on p. 265, the churches are shown as an influential outside force, the one alternative center of meaning and action to that of the Socialist Unity Party. But there is a large body of Christian social thought which these churches have produced.
as they were challenged by one confrontation after another, which is only referred to. On the Indian paradigm on the next page, Christianity does not appear at all, and little reference is made in the text to Christian thought or action. This is sociologically understandable, but from the point of view of the argument of this book, a rich resource has been neglected.

Perhaps, however, this omission is understandable in the light of the purpose of the study. This is not a systematic, but an historical, sociological work. It compares three different societies with different understandings of what is rightly human, and evaluates them critically in the light of a clearly stated theological conviction. A study of the "public theology" and the actual self-reformation and witness of the churches in these societies, is work for another volume.

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