

GOD AND SOCIAL CHANGE

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During the 1960's I was affiliated with and, for a couple of years, worked full time with SNCC (SNICK), the Student NonViolent Coordinating Committee, at the main office in Atlanta, Georgia. The organization is best remembered now for its two most flamboyant leaders, Stokely Carmichael who shook America to its roots with his calls for "Black Power", and H. Rap Brown who gave us the memorable line, "Violence is as American as cherry pie."

As head of SNCC's photography department, I spent most of my time in the basement darkroom printing negatives from SNCC's files and creating materials in which those photographs could be used. But several times a day, I would come up from the basement to socialize with whomever might be around.

One afternoon a group of five or so of us were chatting. Although we worked together and were always in each other's company, we did not talk much about our lives before joining SNCC. However, on this particular afternoon, we somehow started talking about our pasts, and we were amazed to learn that each of us was a P.K., preacher's kid.

Over the course of my life I have learned that P.K.'s have a lot in common, and it does not matter if the P. of the P.K. was a minister, rabbi, or Episcopal priest. We had all grown up going to religious services week in and week out; we had grown up burdened with the expectations of others that we were the little exemplars of holiness as our parents were the major exemplars. It was not surprising that none of us had set foot in a church on a Sunday morning since leav-

ing our parents' homes and had no plans to do so in the near or distant future.

Although there are many P.K.'s who, like my departed older brother, rebel against the moral strictures placed around their lives, that was not the case for those of us in the SNCC office that day. Our lives had been irrevocably shaped by having been set apart as children. A higher degree of morality had been expected of us, and for whatever reasons, we had not rebelled. Even though we knew no one expected the children of teachers to be smarter nor the children of doctors to always be well, we were expected to be God-like. Just as fish are born into water, religion was the environment into which we were born and grew. Whether we attended church or not as young adults, the values of the religions into which we were born had shaped who we had become. We, in turn, had used those values and helped shape the ethos of the civil rights movement.

While the civil rights movement was responsible for significant social changes, it was, at heart, a religious movement. In the segregated black communities of the south, the only black-owned public buildings were churches. The only blacks who did not work for whites were ministers. Thus it was logical that the churches became the places for mass meetings, and black ministers were looked to for leadership. As P.K.'s we had grown up without the same degree of fear as children whose parents' livelihoods could be threatened by economic reprisals. Our lives had been sheltered from the worst of white racism.

Equally important, religion was at the center of our lives. We had to go to Sunday School, and if the teacher asked a question about something in the Bible, we had to know the answer. We had to listen to our fathers' sermons because they might ask us about it at dinner. Entertainment in my house was my father quizzing me on the Bible.

When the non-violent civil rights movement began with the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955, its theology was already familiar to us. The object of the sit-in demonstrations of 1960-61 was not to sit down at a lunch counter next to a white person and eat a hamburger. We could get better hamburgers in the Negro part of town. The object was to change the soul of the adversary!

The concept was not new to us because we had heard our fathers say from their pulpits that God was love, that we were to love our neighbor as much as we loved ourselves, that we were not only to accept whatever harm someone might want to do to us, but we were to then turn the other cheek.

The non-violent civil rights movement took Christian teachings and applied them in the political arena. There had not been anything like it in America since

the abolitionist movement of the 19th century. But William Lloyd Garrison and the other non-violent abolitionists did not have the advantage of the contributions of Mahatma Gandhi to the theory and practice of non-violence. Martin Luther King, Jr. did.

The term, non-violence, does not do justice to the reality of the concept. Non-violence was a political tactic, albeit a very effective one, but Gandhi and the civil rights movement from 1955-1964 wanted something revolutionary. Gandhi coined a new word—*satyagraha*, with the force of one's soul. For him *satyagraha* was a way of life in which you lived in such a way that those you encountered on a daily basis were affected and maybe even transformed by the quality of your living.

The concept of *satyagraha* was easy for me to grasp, not only because I was my minister father's son, but also because the spring semester of 1960 when the sit-in movement started in Nashville, Tennessee, where I lived and was in my final semester at Fisk University, I had been reading Paul Tillich's *Dynamics of Faith* and Martin Buber's *I and Thou* in a Philosophy of Religion course. Both books put at the center of one's life the primacy of the encounter with the mystery that is God, an encounter that should transform even the most mundane parts of one's daily life.

The concept of *satyagraha* was also easy for southern blacks because we had grown up and lived in a religious milieu that taught us that to hate whites was to descend to their level and be no better than they were. It was a moral environment that taught us to pity prejudiced, hateful white people because they were like children who did not know any better. It was also an environment which taught us to make distinctions between those whites who hated us and those who sought our friendship.

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" were not simply nice words in the Black south of the 1950s. Those words were a guidepost that enabled us to maintain our humanity under the inhumane circumstances of racial segregation with its underlying threats of violence if one did not stay in "his place".

When Martin Luther King, Jr., began to articulate with sonorous eloquence the concept of non-violence, he spoke to people who already understood that the moral victory lay with them because they did not fight hatred with hatred nor violence with violence.

It is exceedingly difficult for people who have been oppressed to eschew the temptation to strike back if and when the opportunity presents itself. If this

were not the case, God would not have found it necessary to say more than twenty times in the Pentateuch, “You shall not wrong or oppress the stranger for you were strangers in Egypt.” Because God found it necessary to say this over and over, we know the oppressed have a difficult time not doing unto others what was done unto them.

The concept of non-violence gave southern blacks a way to channel their anger, the understandable desire for revenge, and focus the energy on changing the hearts of the adversary. What Dr. King did so brilliantly was to base his concept of non-violence on a central Biblical teaching: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The goal of the civil rights movement became, not the end of segregation, but, in the words of Jane Stembridge, a white civil rights worker, the goal was the creation of “the beloved community.”

Absolute faith corrupts as absolutely as absolute power.
—Eric Hoffer

The religion practiced by the civil rights movement stands in profound contrast to the religion practiced by a truculent and reactionary Christian Right. Where the religion of the non-violent civil rights movement appealed to the heart and the soul of the adversary, the Christian Right views those who disagree with it as an enemy to be vanquished. Where the religion of the non-violent civil rights movement sought to persuade America to become a place where the self-evident truth that all were created equal would become a reality, the religion of the Christian Right wants to recreate America into its own image. Where the religion of the civil rights movement spoke in words of redemption and reconciliation with the adversary, the religion of the Christian Right speaks in anger, vilifying all who disagree with its definitions of what is good and what is evil.

Many whose politics and theology are liberal, to one degree or another, wonder despairingly what is happening to our country. The short answer is, well, nothing. Even a cursory examination of American history reveals that today’s Christian reactionaries are not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the attitudes and beliefs they espouse are little different than those espoused by the Puritans of the 18th century. Common to the Puritans then and those of today is their unshakable conviction that they, and they alone, know what God desires, and they are the only ones righteous enough to carry out God’s will. The present religious and political conservatism is not the exception in American history; this

is the norm.

Delusions of religious grandeur are not confined to Christian reactionaries. Jewish and Muslim reactionaries in the Middle East speak different languages, but there are similarities in much of the rhetoric about the land being given to them by their respective deities. Sunni and Shiite Muslims have ideological differences and resolve those differences by killing those who disagree with them. The late Israeli Prime Minister, Yitzchak Rabin, was assassinated by a Jewish reactionary on religious grounds sanctioned by several rabbis. And there are Christian reactionaries who are convinced they are doing God's work by harassing women seeking abortions and threatening the lives and even killing doctors who perform abortions.

Such expressions of religion should not come as a surprise. It is more surprising that many of us either fail to recognize, or do not want to acknowledge an incontrovertible fact: religion has a shadow side and a very dangerous one. Rather than look into the shadows of our respective religions and take responsibility for what we see lurking there, we rationalize. Rather than express shame and disgust for the acts of Islamic terrorists and those who use their bodies as bombs to kill themselves and others, Muslim apologists say, "Such people do not represent Islam. Islam is a religion of peace. What they are doing is not the true Islam." Although Christianity's past is clogged with the bodies of infidels and Jews, Christian apologists assert that "Christianity is a religion of love. Those Christians who have murdered in the name of God and Jesus perverted the religion." And those reactionary Jews, who would like nothing better than if all Muslims vanished from the earth, justify themselves by saying that God gave the land to Jews in perpetuity, and someone like Yitzchak Rabin, who would cede any of the land to Muslims, acts against God's will and must die.

It may be difficult to accept that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are religions not only of good but also of evil, that religion can be an instrument of evil as well as good. But until the adherents of the various faiths take responsibility for the shadow sides of their respective religions, there will continue to be believers who do evil and call it good.

We all have private ails. The troublemakers are those who need public cures for their private ails.

—Eric Hoffer

Perhaps the major difference between the religion exemplified in the civil rights movement and that of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim reactionaries is that the civil rights movement placed the responsibility to change on the shoulders of those involved in the movement, not on those outside it.

Reactionary politico-religious movements use their political power to peer into other people's bedrooms and enact laws dictating what sexual positions and orifices are legal and not legal. It is not enough for such movements to exercise power over what books, films, television programs, and internet sites they look at, they seek to control what everyone sees and reads. (And how frightened they are by the sight of women's breasts. Sigmund Freud, please come back and tell us why they will slow down to look at a car wreck on the interstate, but treat the sight of a woman's nipple with more outrage and horror than a photograph of a starving child in Africa).

The non-violent civil rights movement restricted the exercise of power to one's own body and soul. If someone cursed you, you restrained your impulse to curse that person. If someone struck you, you restrained your impulse to strike that person back. And, if someone threatened your life, you chose death rather than take that person's life in defense of your own.

The non-violent civil rights movement was a mass movement that respected the integrity of the individual. Although the movement would have liked to transform the soul of every southern white racist, it was satisfied with changing the behavior of that racist. It was satisfied if the law was applied equally to blacks and whites, regardless of how the whites charged with enforcing that law felt about it or blacks.

The fanatic is not really a stickler to principle. He embraces a cause not primarily because of its justness or holiness but because of his desperate need for something to hold onto.

—Eric Hoffer

Reactionary religious movements seek to obliterate individual identity. One of the photographs on the wall of my living room is of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Schneerson. The rebbe is in the center of the picture surrounded by bearded Hasidim in their black hats, black coats and pants, and

white shirts. What is most striking is that they all look alike. Their appearance is an outward manifestation of the sameness of their actions and their thoughts. But the wearing of identical clothes is a hallmark of any mass movement or organization. Armies, reactionary political movements, and reactionary religious movements offer an identity in which the insecurities inherent in being an individual are given up so one can belong to something bigger.

I left the south at age 22 in 1961 and moved to New York City to make my way in the world. For a few months I lived in Harlem where, in the evenings after work, I would go down to African Square at what was then 125th and 7th Avenue. There on summer evenings soapbox orators extolled the beauty and virtues of blackness. They spoke in tones of adoration about the glorious African past we shared, a past which made us superior to white people. The speakers ridiculed and disparaged whites, mocked their pasty white skin color and limp, stringy hair. I liked listening to them. Their words felt so good inside me, and I wanted to give myself over to the certainty with which they tantalized me. If I could accept their view of the world as black and white, literally, and blacks were on top, I would never have to think again. Even more, I would be safe from doubt, from anxiety, from the terror of being human.

But I couldn't take that step into certainty. Perhaps it was because I was a P.K. Perhaps it was because I had been to college and had conversed with and argued against Plato, Aquinas, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. I had been humbled by the agony with which Jean Paul Sartre and Albert Camus had wrestled with the issues of existence itself. Perhaps it was because I had had Paul Tillich and Martin Buber as mentors. And perhaps it was because I knew what it was to be a stranger and to be oppressed. I would not turn my skin color into a uniform.

Every era has a currency that buys souls. In some the currency is pride. In others it is hope, in still others, it is a holy cause.

—Eric Hoffer

Today's Christian reactionaries are passionate about what they call "the right to life." For many of them there is no meaning higher than preserving the fetus inside women they do not know, or fighting to prolong the agony of a Terry Schiavo. This passion is matched by an equally passionate indifference to the living.

Today's religious reactionaries have been swallowed by the lust for power. If

that were not so then their religious passion would be focused also on the issues of social justice, issues that were articulated eloquently by the prophets and by Jesus. But they look upon the homeless and the poor as people who did not apply themselves, because we all know: in America you can do anything if you just try hard enough. The ultimate irony, however, is while the Christian Right wants to save every fetus, it is all for spending billions and billions of dollars for the war in Iraq. Old men are still sending young men to fight and die in wars, and the Christian Right sees this as good because everybody is going live in a democratic society or die. This is another way of saying that everyone is going to be like them or suffer the consequence, death.

People are lured into religion's shadow when they so identify with that "something bigger" than themselves that unconsciously, they begin to think they are that something bigger, that they are God. What else can they believe when they use political power, and in some places, military power, to coerce others into believing and acting as they do? How else is it possible for them to believe that they are justified in forcing every pregnant woman into carrying a child to term, regardless of the woman's desires? How else is it possible for them to believe that a book they don't want their children to read should not be read by anyone's child and therefore must be removed from libraries? How else is it possible for them to believe that they are absolutely right and everyone who disagrees with them on anything is absolutely wrong?

But I do not despair. I think back to when I was in school in the 1940s and 1950s. From first grade through high school, each morning in school began with us standing and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance. That was followed by singing either "America," "America the Beautiful," or the "Star-Spangled Banner," and some mornings all three. Then came the Lord's Prayer. These opening ceremonies were concluded with each student reciting a Bible verse, and no verse could be repeated. The first two people the teacher called on always said, "Jesus wept" and "God is love," leaving everybody else scrambling. And, of course, being the P.K. in the class, I had to recite last and come up with a verse that had not been said. Somehow I always did.

In addition to such a beginning to the school day, in high school we were required to take a class called "Civics." It was a class about the structure of the government, the Constitution, and democratic ideals.

This was the norm for both black and white students in public schools during these years, or at least it was in the Midwest and south. We listened to the words we said in the pledge about "liberty and justice for all." We listened to the

Bible verses that said “God is love,” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.” In Civics classes we learned that “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

We looked at the society in which we lived and saw that the words we said at the beginning of each school day, the lessons we learned in Civics were not the reality of the society in which we lived. We decided to see if we could make the words a concrete reality. The social changes of the 1960s began in the public school classrooms of the 1950s.

I am positive that in those suburban mega-churches and in religious schools, there are young people listening to passages in the Bible from the prophets and seeing a disparity between the words and the actions of their parents and religious leaders. I am positive there are young people wearing “What Would Jesus Do?” sweat shirts who are wondering what Jesus would do about abortion as an option that women should have just because, who are beginning to wonder what would Jesus do about the homeless people sleeping in parks, and exactly what would Jesus do about people who cannot get health care simply because they are poor, and what would Jesus do about old men sending young men to fight and die in wars.

One day in the not too distant future, some of those children are going to want to make real the Christian ideals of compassion and love. When they do, they are going to make the 1960s look inconsequential.