

ETHNICITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS:
AN ORGANIZATIONAL AND INDIVIDUAL PERSPECTIVE

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Article I of the Universal Declaration of Human rights adopted by the United Nations in December, 1948, holds: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood." Article II stipulates that everyone is entitled to the rights set forth in the Declaration "without distinction of any kind," including race, colour, sex, language.¹ In the view of many American ethnic people the question of human rights and ethnicity has been and still is one of the most neglected aspects of the revival of ethnicity as a factor in American life. In fact, in some ethnic circles there is concern that the issue of human rights is overly abstract and international, and that ethnic groups need to concentrate on American issues.

In recent months there has been new concern in some ethnic quarters with President Reagan's nomination of Ernest W. Lefever as Assistant Secretary of State for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs. While the outcry has been muffled, ethnic leadership has raised a question on the appointment of a man to this post who believes the World Council of Churches is a Marxist leaning group, who has openly supported South Africa and accepted funds from the South African government, and who in 1979 held the position that the United States had no responsibility to promote human rights.²

James H. Williams in the October, 1980, issue of the National Association of Interdisciplinary Ethnic Studies *Newsletter* notes: "There has been little or no consideration given to the concept of ethnicity as it relates to the issues of human rights." The liberalism of the French and American revolutions, as well as the Marxist tradition "have ignored the impact of ethnicity," preferring to defend the individual from the state and, for the Marxist, defending the "proletariate from capitalist exploiters."³

Williams speaks of the myth of the supposed basic truth expressed more than 200 years ago, ". . .all are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights," for it has never applied to "colored ethnics in the United States." The American concern for rights had more to do with property and protection of material gains than with the individual American. Williams calls for the lifting of the national conscience, for the present American mood appears to be drifting away from human rights at a very basic grass-roots level.

Reverend Ben Chavis, the acknowledged leader of the Wilmington 10, released from a North Carolina prison in 1979, wrote in 1978:

In the United States the present reality for millions of Black Americans, Native American Indians, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Asian Americans and other oppressed national minorities is that the violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms are commonplace. . . .There are literally thousands of people imprisoned solely because of their race and poverty.⁵

By imprisoning Ben Chavis for nearly ten years, the state of North Carolina was allowed to violate the Constitution of the United States, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the International Covenant of Civil and Political Rights and the Helsinki Final Act Conference on Human Rights.⁶

Gerald R. Gill writes that:

The past several years, from 1977 to the present, have revealed a clear shift in the attitudes of members of Congress, many leading intellectuals and much of the American public toward both social welfare programs and strategies designed to improve the lives and livelihoods of blacks, other minorities, and the poor. . . .Instead of compassion, one witnesses hostility towards efforts to reduce economic inequities and to overcome the effects of past discrimination. . . .It is not too much to suggest that behind this mania is a growing feeling of meanness.⁷

If Americans are unwilling to support social welfare programs for racial and ethnic groups, it is highly unlikely that Americans will be concerned with their rights. In fact, many Americans, who witnessed the 1980 election results, may have difficulty viewing

ethnic people as human beings.

In the American experience there have been very few ethnic or racial organizations with serious interest in human rights and ethnicity. On the other hand, there have been many ethnic and racial groups interested in civil rights, which are not necessarily the same. In fact, if civil rights groups had been interested in human rights and worked to establish ties with human rights organizations, then the American experience in this field might be entirely different. Human rights, in western societies, has traditionally implied an inherent set of fundamental rights for all persons. Civil rights has implied the intervention of the state or nation and has usually involved protecting the individual from attempts to deny or infringe on such rights. Civil rights are thus protected by law and there is nothing inherent about them.⁸ Philip Mason, long associated with the Institute for Race Relations in England, speaks of legal rights and ideal rights. Legal rights can be enforced in the courts of law and ideal rights are those which people have in a just society and are inherent in all human beings.⁹

Human rights, as used herein, refers to the "ideal" rights basic to human existence: a) the right to health--both physical and mental; b) the right to social security; c) the right to clothing and housing; d) the right to food; e) the right to freedom of association; f) the right to work; g) the right to education; h) the right to participate in cultural life; and i) the right of self-determination.¹⁰ These are not abstract rights in the sense of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; these are basic human rights which all human beings have by virtue of their humanity.

Further, in the United States, as elsewhere, we need acceptance and recognition of the International Bill of Human Rights which contains the model for a global community that is at peace with itself. Instead we have a situation in which two-thirds of the world's population is denied the right to an adequate standard of living and some 500 million are denied the right to be free from hunger.¹¹

Ethnocentrism, the conviction that one's own group has extraordinary value, linked with a suspicion of anything unknown or different, may be the downfall of society as we know it in the United States. In this country, ethnocentrism permeates the home, books, newspapers, schools, churches, and most other social institutions. Prejudice and acts of discrimination have come to provide excuses for exploitation of certain classes or races and women. What many Americans

forget is that most inter-ethnic conflict results, not from pluralism, but rather from dedication to the *status quo* and an imbalance of power which has racial and ethnic groups at the bottom by design.¹²

As a country, as individuals seeking liberation, as teachers, as administrators in ethnic and minority studies programs, we need to strive to create an informed public opinion which serves as the only real safeguard for human rights. We need to demonstrate that freedom in society, above all else, means that we recognize the justice and creativity of conflict, difference, and diversity. We need to seek an environment of mutual respect where integration will mean "equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of tolerance." We need to act now. We need to strive to have everyone judged in one race classification--human. Gandhi declared some years ago that civilization will be judged by the way minorities are treated.¹³ We need to push hard to make up for lost time if we are to be judged by that criterion alone. There is not a single organization in this land that gives serious consideration to human rights and ethnicity. On a broader scale, there are few organizations in the world that give attention to ethnicity and human rights. But, there are some, and that gives us hope.

By far the oldest organization with specific concern for ethnicity and human rights is The Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights and its Committee for Indigenous People, based in London, England. This is the modern version of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society and the Aborigines Protection Society, both founded in the early nineteenth century. The present-day group is a direct descendent, and through its consultative status with the United Nations strives to improve the status of oppressed people throughout the world.¹⁴

The present-day Anti-Slavery Society has three specific goals: 1) the elimination of all forms of slavery and forced labor; 2) the defense of the interests of oppressed and threatened indigenous peoples; 3) the promotion of human rights in accord with the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Society has increasingly taken on human rights advocacy "including those of people neither enslaved nor indigenous," but victims who have no other voice. Diplomacy and publicity are the tools of the society and, based on long experience, the officers and members know how to use these weapons well.¹⁵

Since 1975 the organization has prepared twenty-one

reports covering a range of oppression that most of us cannot even conceive: hunting, killing, and enslaving of the Ache Indians of Paraguay; forced labor in Equatorial Guinea; debt bondage of the Andoke, a South American ethnic group; traffic of persons in Hong Kong; the dispossession, oppression, and killing of peasants in Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Honduras, and Bolivia; the condition of tin workers in Bolivia; bonded labor in India; child labor in Morocco, Colombia, India, Hong Kong, and many others. The Anti-Slavery Society became a serious thorn in the side of the Soviet Union in 1977 to the point that an official complaint and motion was made to have its consultative status in the United Nations revoked. The charge was that the Anti-Slavery Society, Amnesty International and the International League for Human Rights "systematically abused their consultative status in order to slander socialist countries."¹⁶ The resolution did not pass or even receive serious consideration except by socialist countries, as defined by the Soviet Union.

In 1978 the Ford Foundation awarded the Anti-Slavery Society a substantial grant for three years of research on oppression in various parts of the world. That work is well underway and will include two reports with reference to the United States, one on American Indians and their status in their native land and the second on the utilization of "servants" by the United Nations delegates and counsels in the United States.

Two other organizations that have made important inroads on behalf of oppressed ethnic groups and individuals are Amnesty International and the Minority Rights Group, both based in London, England, but with offices in the United States. The Minority Rights Group was formed in 1972 as an independent and international non-governmental body to work on behalf of all those denied human dignity and human rights. Registered as a trust in London where its base office is located, the group's scope is worldwide.¹⁷

The individual behind the Minority Rights Group, its director from the start, is Ben Whitaker. Formerly a lawyer, lecturer in law, and a Labor Party member of the British Parliament from Hampstead, he also served as Junior Minister for Overseas Development from 1966 to 1970. He has written on the police, crime and society, and parks for people, but since 1972 he has devoted nearly all his energies to the Minority Rights Group.¹⁸

The Minority Rights Group has two major goals. First, "by investigating and publishing facts. . .it

aims to help the position of persecuted or disadvantaged ethnic, religious, or cultural minorities (or majorities) in any country." Second, "by its work it hopes to develop an international conscience with regard to minorities' treatment and human rights."¹⁹

The Minority Rights Group has no formal membership. Nevertheless, its supporters include persons of nearly every race, religion, nationality, and political view. The reports published by the organization have been universally hailed for their objectivity and accuracy. The politics of any given situation are avoided at all costs. Its base philosophy has been stated by its director who sees each individual as a minority:

The really unforgiveable inhumanity, I believe, is our habit of viewing a person not as [an individual], but distorted by a group judgment generated by often tribal emotions.²⁰

The organization has recently opened offices in Canada and the United States and is actively seeking supporters in both countries.

The third group, and by far the best known, is Amnesty International. Winner of a Nobel Peace Prize, this organization dates back to 1961 and was founded in London, England. The key figure behind the group was Peter Benenson, a prominent lawyer in England. An article by Benenson in the *London Observer*, May 28, 1961, drew attention to the large number of people throughout the world who were being imprisoned solely because of their opinions. The article concluded: "Pressure of opinion a hundred years ago brought about the emancipation of the slaves. It is now for man to insist upon the same freedom for his mind as he won for his body."²¹ The primary concern was and still is "prisoners of conscience" without regard to color, around the world. Prisoners of conscience are those people who are imprisoned to prevent them from expressing their opinions. The primary goals of Amnesty International are: 1) to get the prisoner released from jail, usually by a massive public pressure campaign; and 2) to aid the families of prisoners if they can and in whatever ways they can.²²

In July, 1961, a meeting of national sections of already established groups was held in Luxembourg. Belgium, France, Germany, Ireland, and Great Britain took part in the meeting. There are now over thirty national sections. In October, 1961, a third meeting was held in London and established the basic aim for

the organization as "universal implementation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" and articles nine and ten "of the European Convention of the Rights of Man which guarantee liberty of religion, opinion and expression."²³

The work of Amnesty International has been impressive over the years all over the world, with some glaring exceptions, including the United States. The intervention Amnesty made on behalf of the Wilmington 10 in North Carolina was its first key victory in the United States and this happened in 1979. The Wilmington 10 were adopted as political prisoners of conscience by Amnesty and appeals on their behalf were made from nearly every corner of the world.²⁴

Within the United Nations' structure there is one other organization that deserves mention regarding ethnicity and human rights, the United Nations Commission on Human Rights and its subcommission on slavery and native peoples, both coming under the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC). Organizations granted Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) status with the Council must be concerned with economic, social, cultural, educational, health, scientific, technological problems and related matters "and to questions of human rights."²⁵

There is no American ethnic, human, or civil rights organization that has NGO consultative status with the United Nations. Two years ago when the Council heard presentations from indigenous peoples, the American Indian spokespersons were heard as delegates of international groups based outside the United States.²⁶

There are many who believe that society's disregard for human rights will cost us dearly in the long run. Given the alienation of ethnic people, especially those in urban centers, the greatest catastrophe we face as a society may result from our disregard of basic human rights. Overpopulation, pollution, nuclear warfare, communism, we may yet deal with; but treating everyone as a human being, with inherent fundamental human rights, regardless of color, may be too much to ask. The gap between rich and poor, the violence in our society, and the growth and decay of modern urban centers have to do with race and human relations. The modern city is at the same time a place of hope and a place of despair, and the changes concerning ethnicity and human rights are going to have to come in the city; they will be much longer coming in the rural areas of the country, homogenous as they are.

Our present-day urban industrial way of life is

dying. It is self-destroying--not only for ethnic groups, they are only in the forefront. The urban industrial way of life is based on a view of egocentric people who are creatures of desires and self-gratification, not as individuals with human rights. We now accept the notion set forth by Peter Drucker called the "marketing concept"--the purpose of industry is no longer to produce goods which are needed by human beings, but rather to create a market.²⁷

Ethnicity and human rights should be on the minds of everyone and should be a major concern to all ethnic groups. We all have an ethnic background and we are all human; we have fundamental human rights, and we cannot count on a few international organizations to save the day. Ethnicity, human rights, compassion, understanding, and race relations are all intertwined, and we must admit we do have a problem, and recognize that we are a part of it.

We need, at a broader level, to begin to think about solutions. Any solution will be difficult and will run the risk of being condemned as simplistic or idealistic. One of the more promising developments to emerge in recent years is the concept of global education. Defined as the "process of achieving global perspective," global education is gathering supporters in many countries around the world. Jan L. Tucker suggests that by adding international human rights at the base content for global education, the major weakness seen by critics, that is lack of content, is largely removed. Other, and perhaps related content areas are available: food, population, environmental issues, war and peace studies. "International human rights has an especially important contribution to offer to the content of global education."²⁸ The addition of ethnicity will add further to the content areas and supplement themes identified by UNESCO in the 1974 recommendations concerning appropriate curriculum areas, "the principle of nondiscrimination," and "equality."²⁹

In October, 1978, a major conference on teaching human rights was held at the University of Akron, by the Center for Peace Studies. Presentation topics included: "Human Rights and Peace Studies, Teaching Human Rights, Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Policy, Teaching Human Rights in Social Studies Education, Global Perils, Lifeboat Ethics, and the Meaning of Human Rights." The question of content, or lack thereof, was not even an issue.³⁰

A few months earlier, in June, 1978, a symposium on International Human Rights Education was held at the Wingspread Conference Center in Racine, Wisconsin. The

meeting focused on international human rights in primary and secondary school programs and in teacher education. Approaches, objectives, principles, strategies, teacher training suggestions were discussed.³¹ Thus the ground work and rationale have been laid. The current need is for increased promotion, refinement, and continued development. Florida International University has a grant from the Department of Education to study the incorporation of international rights into general education and professional programs.³² One more needed addition is the concept of ethnicity.

Ethnic Studies has an important international obligation which, to date, has been virtually ignored. Nevertheless, education does hold one possible solution in the area of ethnicity and human rights.

One cautionary note regarding education, ethnicity, and human rights must be made. At the 1980 U.N. Sub-Commission on Human Rights meeting, where debate focused on racism and racial discrimination and was devoted "mainly to a discussion of education in human rights," Patrick Montgomery of the Anti-Slavery Society wrote that human rights:

promises to be a controversial subject, strewn with pitfalls for the unwary. If we are not careful we shall find we have taught people their rights and encouraged them to forget their obligations; or we shall scare them with tales of atrocities or put wrong ideas into their heads; or, lest we do that, refrain from telling them the truth.³³

Watergate, if nothing else, demonstrated the accuracy of the message. As people devoted to liberation, we need to ensure that the debate, the learning, the education, is not distorted. We need to ensure that global international human rights education is carried out in the spirit of Paulo Freire's concept of liberation and education not being neutral.

In early December, 1980, Amnesty International released its report for 1980, a massive 408 page report, 110 country-by-country review of human rights. No country comes away untarnished. "Half the countries of the world imprison thousands of people for their political or religious beliefs, and torture, summary trials and execution are common. . . ." Amnesty charged that in the United States:

police brutality, especially towards members of ethnic minorities, is widespread and severe, resulting in death in many cases. Although it

is probably not due to official policy, it is undoubtedly able to occur so frequently because it is officially tolerated.³⁴

There is a relationship between human rights and ethnicity. The human rights organizations of the world need to unite and stand firm on violations of such rights wherever they occur.

Notes

This is a revised version of a paper presented at the Third Annual NAIES Regional Conference, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, November 13-14, 1980, and the Ninth Annual Conference on Ethnic and Minority Studies, April 21-24, 1981, Las Cruces, New Mexico.

¹Ben Whitaker, ed. *The Fourth World*. (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972) 5.

²*Los Angeles Times*. (March 5, 1981) and the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*. (March 8, 1981). As of May 26, 1981, Mr. Lefever had not been confirmed by the Senate. The *Los Angeles Times*, among several leading newspapers in the country urged President Reagan to withdraw the nomination. Senate Leaders, Howard Baker and Charles Percy indicate there are problems with Lefever's nomination and confirmation. *Los Angeles Times*. (May 23, 1981) and (May 25, 1981). In early June, 1981, the Senate nominations committee voted not to support Mr. Lefever's appointment and he withdrew his name from consideration.

³James H. Williams. "Ethnicity and Human Rights: Raising the National Consciousness." *NAIES Newsletter*. Vol. 5, No. 2. (October, 1980) 19.

⁴*Ibid.*, 19.

⁵Benjamin F. Chavis. *Human Rights in the United States of America*. (United Church of Christ, 1978) 2.

⁶*Ibid.*, 17. The Helsinki Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe, 1975, reaffirmed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and pledged implementation of the fundamental freedoms set forth by the United Nations. A review of the Helsinki conference is currently underway in Madrid, Spain, with the Soviet Union attempting to block adoption of an agenda, delaying the conference, hoping for collapse, see *Los Angeles Times*. (November 11, 1980).

- ⁷Gerald R. Gill. *Meanness Mania the Changed Mood*. (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1980) 1.
- ⁸Whitaker. Op. cit., 6.
- ⁹Ibid., 6.
- ¹⁰Philip Alston. *Human rights and the Basic Needs Strategy for Development*. (London: The Anti-Slavery Society, 1979) 23-33.
- ¹¹Philip Alston. *Making and Breaking Human Rights*. (London: The Anti-Slavery Society, 1979) 1.
- ¹²Whitaker. Op. cit., 11.
- ¹³Ibid., 9.
- ¹⁴Patrick Montgomery. "The Anti-Slavery Society, 1973." *Contemporary Review*. Vol. 223, No. 1291. (August, 1973) 1.
- ¹⁵*Membership Brochure*. Anti-Slavery Society for the Protection of Human Rights.
- ¹⁶*The Annual Report of the Anti-Slavery Society, 1977-78*. (London: The Anti-Slavery Society, 1978) 3.
- ¹⁷Whitaker. Op. cit., 9.
- ¹⁸Ibid., Dustjacket.
- ¹⁹Ibid., 9.
- ²⁰Ibid., 11.
- ²¹*London Observer*. (May 28, 1961).
- ²²*Membership Brochure*. Amnesty International. 2.
- ²³Ibid., 2.
- ²⁴Benjamin F. Chavis. Op. cit., 2.
- ²⁵*Resolution 1296*. Economic and Social Council Resolution on Consultative Arrangements. (May 23, 1968) 1.
- ²⁶Patrick Montgomery. Personal communication. (May 8, 1979).

²⁷Stephen Verney. *Into the New Age*. (Glasgow: Collins, 1976) 26-27.

²⁸Jan L. Tucker. "International Human Rights: A Content Bridge to a Global Perspective." *Global Perspectives*. (October, 1980) 3-6.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 5.

³⁰June Burton, ed. *Proceedings, Teaching Human Rights, A Dissemination Conference*. (Akron: Center for Peace Studies, 1978) 1-3.

³¹Tucker. *op. cit.*, 5.

³²*Ibid.*, 5.

³³Anti-Slavery Society. *Newsletter*. (September, 1980). 2-3.

³⁴"World Abuses Cited by Amnesty International." *Los Angeles Times*. (December 10, 1980).