

Ronning Lecture Explores the Roots and Meaning of the Human Rights Movement

In 1980, the esteemed literary critique, Sir Geoffrey Elton, wrote in an article about the great medieval humanist Thomas More, author of *Utopia*:

"Anyone so deeply conscious of the unhappy state of mankind in the mass is always likely to do what he can for particular specimens of it. Believing that man has cast away grace does not necessarily make the believer into a misanthrope; and in his courteous and considerate behaviour towards all and sundry More was only testifying to the compassion of his conservative instincts. Genuine conservatives despair of humanity but cherish individuals, even as true radicals, believing in man's capacity to better himself unaided, love mankind and express that love in hatred of particular individuals. To avoid any rash inferences touching the author of these remarks, I had better add that most of us oscillate between those extremes most of the time. More was more consistent."¹

Rewind thirty-two years, to heady 1948, and you will see players on the world stage – still reeling from the realities of Hiroshima – seeking out a path that would transcend “conservatism,” and “radicalism,” for one of consistency. If totalitarianism, ultimately, could only be defeated by wholesale destruction, what would the future hold? Under such circumstances, could a meaningful “future” even be imagined? Such were the questions posed as the fledgling United Nations envisioned a *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, the topic of this year’s Ronning Centre Distinguished Lectures, given October 10-11, 2007 by Dr. Clinton Timothy Curle.

In this year’s lectures, Dr. Curle presented an alternative and reinvigorating vision of the human rights movement, now so often seems to be bogged down in pitched battles between entrenched camps of a real or imagined “right” or “left” and exacerbated by the “culture wars” taking place in the U.S., France, and (bizarrely) Scandinavia!? By returning us to the origins of the *UDHR*, as originally drafted by Canadian scholar John Peters Humphrey, Curle fleshed out the much more robust understanding Humphrey had of what it means to be *human*. As Humphrey wrote in his article “The Parent of Anarchy,” prior to his work for the U.N., “with the death of natural law theory, we have no conceptual framework to pursue a vision of human rights that establishes a universal politics of the individual, not just States.” Notions of *rights* properly related to

¹ "The Real Thomas More?" by G. R. Elton, in *Psychological Medicine* (1980), 10, 611-617 (quotation from p. 614).

this prior concern about the nature of the individual's in modern society. Fleshed out in his book, *Humanité: John Humphrey's Alternative Account of Human Rights*, these three lectures present a dramatic critique, if not a 180 degree about-face, from the way the UDHR has routinely been for almost fifty years.

In his first talk, given at the Faith & Life Centre on the Augustana Campus, *Re-Thinking the Enlightenment: New Directions for International Human Rights*, Curle presented a response to the impasse of competing notions of rationality. Without surrendering to what he called "Kant's Gang" - the unrestrained estimation of the free, autonomous, rational individual, or to "Reason" merely as an expression of power (the inner logic of Nietzsche and his postmodern progeny), nor finally to Neo-Thomism, Curle argued for a richer articulation of the best gifts of the Enlightenment project - namely a deeper understanding of the "individual." Drawing from the work of Hannah Arendt and others, the nature of the human rights is not simply to be found in the avoidance of suffering, nor in the establishment of pragmatic "life philosophies," but in the increased capacity of the individual's participation in and with society. The influence of the human rights movement has been so internalized in modern, democratic life, argues Curle, that "the contemporary person does not think *about* human rights, but *from* human rights."

In his second presentation, given at the University of Alberta, "*The most important book I have ever read*" - *John Humphrey, Henri Bergson and International Human Rights*, Curle traced the historical trajectory of the drafting of the Declaration, the debates over its authorship, and the influence of French philosopher Henri Bergson on Humphrey's thought. He recounted the lively first meeting regarding the drafting the UDHR that took place in Eleanor Roosevelt's apartment in 1947. Humphrey attended along with Chinese diplomat P.C. Chang and Lebanese Christian diplomat philosopher Charles Malik. One can only what directions the meeting may have taken, and the UDHR, had our own Chester Ronning been in attendance as well! Curle recounts how Humphrey, through Roosevelt's fiat, was given the task of preparing the Declaration's first draft, shepherding a line between Malik's uncompromising philosophical principles and Chang's pragmatism. In an increasingly complex world, neither extreme would be able to sustain the universality intended by the project.

In this final lecture, *What has Constantinople to do with New York? Byzantine Reflections on International Human Rights*, given at St. Herman's Orthodox Church in Edmonton, Dr. Curle gave a profound meditation on the nature of *humanité* as reflected in both Humphrey's appraisal of Bergson, and the relationship of that view to the anthropology of the Greek Cappadocian Fathers. Dr. Curle not only presented a stunning reorientation of the general tenor of thinking on the UDHR, but also on its inspiration and coherence with a Christian vision of the world. A Wesleyan Methodist pastor as well as a political philosopher, perhaps we should not be surprised by this interpretation. But giving the evidence, not only in the

lectures, but in his book, Curle presents a compelling case. So much so, that when asked in the conversation following this final lecture, whether Humphrey would have agreed with the Declaration being titled simply a “universal declaration of humanity,” Curle responded with an unqualified, “Yes.” At this, I believe the hearts of the great Cappadocian Fathers – perhaps even St. Basil – would have been, to use that lovely Wesleyan phrase, “strangely warmed.”

One of the most significant gifts of our present historical circumstance, here and now, is the sustained capacity for listening and learning. I am not certain that it is a “right,” but I do believe that it is a responsibility and a treasure, if we are able to receive it. Here in Canada in 2007, both the great wisdom traditions and the space created under the secular canopy continue to allow for, and even necessitate, discourse on the intersection of religion and public life. This conversation is the core business of the Chester Ronning Centre, and the annual Distinguished Lectureship sponsored by the Centre and the Hendrikson Family Endowment is one of the premier expressions of that task.

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CDs of the Lecture are available from the Chester Ronning Centre for the Study of Religion and Public Life. For more information please visit our website:

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