

Thoughts on the Group Topic

The role of philanthropy in constraining or preventing ethnic conflict has encouraged my continuing involvement in Central and Eastern Europe. In Belgrade last summer I asked an elderly Serbian philosopher which text, among all those he has taught over the years, he would choose to help students think about the conflict that has destroyed the former Yugoslavia. Without much reflection he said, "the correspondence of Erasmus and Luther on toleration."

In my unfocused way I have been responding to that suggestion ever since. The most important effect has been to shift focus from ethnic conflict to tolerance. The philosopher in Belgrade used the word "toleration," which emphasizes religious rights and practices, as in the Toleration Act in England in 1689. That had been preceded by a Declaration of Indulgence in 1687; the word "indulgence" brings out the core idea: putting up with people and ideas you don't like.

I began my search not in England but in the Netherlands with Desiderius Erasmus (1566-1636) and the events associated with the Protestant Reformation, when lines in the sands were drawn within the Christian community across Europe. Beginning with Erasmus, however, means beginning first with his role in the Renaissance and the rise of humanism. Erasmus and Luther knew one another and for some time shared a general critique of the Roman Catholic Church and its hierarchy. Ultimately they parted ways: Luther was willing to break from the Church entirely and Erasmus was determined to reform it rather than abandon it.

There was another important difference, reflecting their separate intellectual histories. Erasmus became the leading advocate of classical learning as the best way to understand Christianity and its history and theology. Luther focused narrowly on the Bible. Erasmus was repudiated by the Church for his admiration for "pagan" literature and philosophy; Erasmus had little to share intellectually with Luther who was largely ignorant of the Greek and Latin classics.

One path led to Erasmus's biography and writings; another led to the contest between Erasmus and Luther. A third led to the history of the Renaissance and Reformation.

While juggling those questions I happened onto several others under the rubric of toleration: the Advice to a Desolate France by Sebastian Castellio, an eloquent appeal for peace in the midst of religious wars between Catholics and Calvinists. ("At the time and in the heat of the struggle, both Catholics and Calvinists rejected advocates of tolerance as harmful to their respective holy causes," according to Albert Geysler, the South African professor of Divinity who wrote the preface to the 1975 reprint.)

Castellio is famous for his defense of human rights; Michael Servetus is famous as a victim. Servetus was denounced as a heretic by John Calvin and burned at the stake. His story is told by the Yale historian Roland H. Bainton in Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus. After being found guilty of heresy and condemned to the

stake, Servetus pleaded without success to Calvin for clemency. Calvin said that all Servetus had to do was confess to the heresy he had tried to foist on humanity; failing that, Calvin could only let him die, "following the rule of St. Paul, I withdrew from the heretic *who was self-condemned*. [Emphasis added.]" Bainton concludes, "The severity of Calvin was born of zeal for the truth and even concern for the victim. Death itself seemed not too harsh a penalty for perversion of the truth of God. Today any of us would be the first to cast a stone against Calvin's intolerance; and seldom do we reflect that we who are aghast at the burning of one man to ashes for religion do not hesitate for the preservation of our culture to reduce whole cities to ashes."

I looked into the treatment of the Servetus affair in half-a-dozen biographies of Calvin. A recent one, by a prolific theologian and historian from Oxford named Alistair McGrath:

"In 1903, a granite monument was erected at the site of Servetus' execution. Its inscription condemns 'an error which belonged to his century'. Yet, sadly, every major Christian body which traces its history back to the sixteenth century has blood liberally scattered over its credentials. Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican: all have condemned and executed their Servetuses, whether directly or, as in the case of Calvin himself, indirectly. It is fair to suggest that it is improper to single out Calvin as if he were somehow the initiator of this vicious trend, or a particularly vigorous and detestable supporter of the practice, where the majority of his enlightened contemporaries wished it to be abolished. *The case of Etienne Le Court, who was publicly degraded, strangled, and burned by the Inquisition at Rouen on 11 December 1533, for suggesting that, among other things, 'women will preach the gospel', would seem considerably more disturbing.* Perhaps historians, like everyone else, have their axes to grind." (Emphasis added because Le Court seemed to have been guilty of philanthropic advocacy as well as an exercise of the moral imagination.)

Heresy and its consequences brings echoes of the revived controversy about the career of Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, now being restored to respectability after decades of being the prototype of political witch-hunter. I didn't follow that path, but the material is there. It leads to the writings of Whittaker Chambers, his involvement with the trial of Alger Hiss, and the anti-Communist crusade of the 1950s and 1960s (and beyond), and in my case to personal memories of the Army-McCarthy hearings on television...

The term "witch-hunter" led me down another path, the practice of witchcraft and its consequences, and to the contemporary indulgent [sic] curiosity about Wiccans on the one hand and Christian intolerance of witchcraft among women in military service, on the other.

The history of witchcraft can lead to the history of what is perceived as "evil" in our world - evil and the boundaries of tolerance. It turns out that notions of evil and social attitudes toward sexual behavior are closely intertwined. (Incidentally, Luther was far more tolerant of carnal sins than spiritual ones.) A very large book by a French historian (and the first of several volumes on the subject) is entitled Sin and Fear The Emergence of a Western Guilt Culture 13th to 18th Centuries, and does for sin and fear what Robert

Burton did for melancholy. (Have you ever browsed in The Anatomy of Melancholy? Delightful, despite its title.)

I noted in passing a book on the Spanish Inquisition, until the Nazis the model of its kind, and came upon an "Edict of Faith" of 1519 apparently aimed at Jews and Muslims who had ostensibly converted to Christianity: chief among their objectionable practices were "over-scrupulous attention to personal cleanliness and hygiene [*changing into clean personal linen on Saturdays*], a predilection for or aversion from certain foods [*refrain from eating sheep... who do not wish to eat salt pork, hares, rabbits, snails, or fish that have not scales*], observing certain fasts and festivals [*observe the fast of pardon (Day of Atonement)*], laying out the dead according to the Eastern methods, etc. All these practices were considered equally heinous, so that the denunciation of some trivial personal habit was frequently sufficient to bring a man to the stake."

The last deviations on the route led me to the subjects of ideology and human nature, but I'll cut this short. In my way of connecting things, ideology and human nature offer ways of thinking about philanthropy and its role in society - and is evident from this meander, about misanthropy as well. Confucius and Mencius differed about whether humans are essentially self-interested or altruistic, and so *human nature* seems a well-established point of discussion. *Ideology* is equally contested - it may qualify as an "essentially contested concept," a notion worth examining if we haven't done that yet. Leslie Stephenson has expanded his little book of seven theories of human nature to ten; there are at least as many theories of ideology. A new book entitled Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology, says that some social theorists who don't like the word *ideology*, prefer such terms as *discourse, episteme, habitus, tradition, language game, interpretive community*." That's seven by my count. Under whatever labels, we shouldn't think about philanthropy and ethnic conflict or philanthropy and tolerance without looking at them through the lenses of human nature and ideology.

Beyond mentioning Sebastian Castelleo, I haven't traced the parallel history of the rise of tolerance, an important phase in the social history of the moral imagination. Philanthropic initiatives led to the Toleration Act, recaptured the classics, sought ecumenical common ground, transcended ethnic and nationalist boundaries, and advanced the values and practices we now call human rights.

The *group topic* of the semester is tolerance; enough of that for now. The *theme* of the semester is philanthropy and liberal education. A theme is even wider than a topic and so I will limit myself to a few comments on some of the readings:

Several of the readings look at the comparative history of ideas and ideals of education, from ancient Greece and Stoic principles and ancient China and Taoist and Buddhist and Confucian principles, through the notion of knighthood to the education of medieval women and to Cotton Mather's Essays to Do Good and Huston Smith's The Purposes of Higher Education -- and to Payton on philanthropy and liberal education.

Philanthropy is deeply committed to action - even Kant's good will is not enough. Or perhaps good will compels us to act. Liberal education is about preparing to act but to act always with forethought and reflection. Liberal education is about philanthropic values like tolerance (and hope and justice), and seeks understanding of those ideas in action. Ours is not the only society that understands the importance of liberal education or that is engaged in the practice of philanthropy. As the world becomes more of a global community, the search for shared values becomes urgent. Is "liberal education" a starting point? If not, where should we turn?

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