Leadership University *Reprint*

Reprinted from First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion and Public Life • December 1992• Number 19

Moral Credibility After the Evil Empire: The Witness of IRD

We are a month late in noting an anniversary that should not pass unnoted. 1981 witnessed the launching of the Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD), a venture that was to profoundly shake and partially reshape the social postures of mainline/oldline Protestantism.

One might argue that IRD started in 1977 when David and Linda Jessup decided to send their children to Sunday School at Marvin Memorial United Methodist Church in Silver Spring, Md. They thought it more than a little odd when their children brought home lessons praising the Hanoi regime in Vietnam and cheering the great humanitarian achievements of Fidel Castro in Cuba. Jessup, a liberal labor organizer with the AFL–CIO, got in touch with Good News, the evangelical Methodist group, and that was followed by reaching out to concerned Christians in other churches, including George Weigel (now of the Ethics and Public Policy Center), Michael Novak (American Enterprise Institute), James V. Schall, S.J. (Georgetown University), and the Editor–in–Chief of this journal.

Under the early leadership of Penn Kemble–a (Scoop) Jackson liberal and key player in the Coalition for a Democratic Majority–IRD went public with its protest against the ideological drift of oldline Protestantism. There followed hard–hitting exposes by *Reader's Digest* and the CBS "60 Minutes" program, to which oldline bureaucracies, and the United Methodists in particular, reacted with a frenzy of counterattacks. The Methodists even hired "researchers" whose job it was, in George Weigel's terms, "to sketch, in lurid fashion, the web of political, denominational, and philanthropic connections that bound IRD's ecumenically disparate leadership together: an exercise that was one part House Un–American Activities Committee, and one part Laurel and Hardy." The oldline denominations and the National Council of Churches again and again drove home what they thought was the most damning indictment of the IRD and its leadership: "They are anti–Communists." About that they were certainly right.

Ten years later, when almost everybody says that there is nobody in the ecclesiastical chickencoop but us anti–Communists, it is hard to remember how powerful and pervasive was the commitment of the "church and society curia" to what they declared to be the global Marxist revolution against the capitalist imperialism of the West. It is hard to remember, but it is necessary to remember. Glenn Tinder, author of *The Political Meaning of Christianity*, has written: "I suggest that opponents of Marxism should be wary of the impulse to be generous in victory. For the most fundamental thing to be said about Marxism is that it is massively and profoundly wrong. Its being an immense historical misfortune is not accidental; it is an immense spiritual error. Marxism is a radical misinterpretation of the nature of human beings and their situation on earth. Summarily, the error is that human beings are tacitly deified." Marxism, in short, was and is idolatry.

Experiments in applied Marxism, so widely supported by the oldline churches, have claimed more than 100 million lives in the last seven decades. With a few notable exceptions, the evils of Communism were systematically belittled or denied by the executives of oldline Protestantism in this country. Especially from the 1960s onward, these people truly were, in the words of the IRD statement of purpose, "apologists for oppression." Most odiously, they belittled, denied, or even justified the massive persecution of Christians and other believers in this the century of martyrs.

In the sheer volume of murder and sundry crimes against humanity, Communism far exceeded the "achievement" of the Third Reich. After 1945 it was inconceivable that those who had served as apologists for Nazism would have maintained their positions of respectability and influence. Yet, in some of our churches and in other havens for the refugees from Marxist radicalisms past, people pretend that the defeat of Communism is no big deal. Business goes on as usual. The "Prophetic Justice Unit" of the National Council of Churches (yes, it really is called that) continues to grind out its screeds of indignation against the genocidal, racist, sexist, imperialistic depredations of the West. It continues to employ "Marxist analysis" in agitating for its version of a "just society."

A big difference is that today almost nobody pays attention. It is hard to remember that only ten years ago the National Council of Churches was still one of the major institutions of the American Establishment. It was up there with entitites such as the American Medical Association and Harvard University. A good many people, in the media at least, really did believe that the NCC "spoke for" upwards of 40 million American Protestants. In size and influence, it is now a wan shadow of its former self, chiefly receiving amused public notice when it outdoes itself in some new tirade of outrageousness, such as its condemnation of Christopher Columbus and all his works and ways.

The events of history have discredited the social witness of oldline Protestantism, and not least among those events was the relentless truth–telling of IRD. The leaders of IRD can take great satisfaction from the role that they have played. At the same time, IRD has not succeeded in its initial purpose of bringing the churches to repentance and amendment of life. The moral shambles of oldline leadership today is marked by embarrassment, confusion, and feeble self–justification. Perhaps this is a condition on the way to repentance and amendment of life, but there are few indications of that to date.

So the work of IRD continues. Ecumenically and through denominational renewal groups, IRD tirelessly and persuasively lays out the Christian basis for democratic society that is both free and virtuous. Dr. Kent Hill, now president of IRD, is leading the organization in providing help also to Christians working for democracy in the post–Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. This year, in a development that nobody could have anticipated a decade ago, Hill is teaching Christian apologetics on the faculty of the former Department of Atheism at Moscow State University.

IRD fought and continues to fight the good fight. Its 1981 manifesto began this way: "Jesus Christ is Lord. That is the first and final assertion Christians make about all of reality, including politics. Believers now assert by faith what one day will be manifest to the sight of all: every earthly sovereignty is subordinate to the sovereignty of Jesus Christ." That manifesto, updated in the light of the Revolution of 1989, concludes: "We cannot help but see the hand of God in this singular, nonviolent revolution. . . .We have met and prayed, wept and laughed, with many of the victims of Communist oppression on whose behalf we once worked. May their witness to Christian fidelity help renew the life of the Church in our country, as it helps renew the life of society in theirs. And yet, amidst the rejoicing, we also know that the victims of freedom's denial still number in the many millions. And we know that one day, before the judgment throne of God, those who were voiceless will ask what we said on their behalf. What we say or do may seem to be of little moment. But in the face of every discouragement we will persist in hope because finally, as we said at the start, Jesus Christ is Lord."

Ten years later, the Institute on Religion and Democracy emerges with high honor from a dark time when much of the Christian leadership in this country succumbed to mendacity, cowardice, and willful ignorance in refusing to speak the truth, and in deriding those who did speak the truth, about the most evil empire that, in a long history of evil, has ever afflicted the Church and the world. Is that anti–Communism? You bet it is. It is past time for those who were the anti–anti–Communists to explain themselves–especially to the victims of the evil that they belittled or denied.

There is no room in the Christian ethic for vindictiveness. The alternative to vindictiveness is not evasion but confession and forgiveness. For the sake of the truth and the moral integrity of the churches, Glenn Tinder's warning should be taken to heart: "Opponents of Marxism should be wary of the impulse to be generous in victory."

FIRST THINGS
156 Fifth Avenue, Suite 400
New York, NY 10010
Phone: (212) 627-1985
Email: ft@firstthings.com

Leadership University
3440 Sojourn Drive, Suit 200
Carrollton, TX 75006
Phone: (972) 713-7130
Fax: (972) 713-7670

Web: http://www.firstthings.com

Email: lu@leaderu.com
Web: http://www.leaderu.com