

The Nolde Foundation Convocation at the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia.

11:30 Tuesday, December 2, 2008

## **CHURCHES NEED HUMAN RIGHTS: HUMAN RIGHTS NEED CHURCHES**

### **A. Introduction**

In February 1990 I was attending a conference on Lord Acton at Boston University. My book on Acton (called by his preferred definition of 'freedom' – *The Reign of Conscience*) had only been published in New York in 1987, and writing it had made me suspect that the sensitivity of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century public figures to universal human rights owed something to the dominance of Acton's Christian narrative of constitutional liberty in college textbooks of the English-speaking world in the inter-war period. The life work of James T. Shotwell, based at Columbia University (and indeed O. Frederick Nolde's teaching-notes on church history in this seminary), support this view.

I had begun to explore. I visited the archives of the World Council of Churches (the WCC) in Geneva and found that the first box I opened on its Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (the CCIA) led straight into the work of Dr Frederick Nolde, its founding Director, regarding human rights. I saw he'd been based at this seminary. I wrote to the Dean to ask if I might come on to Philadelphia after my Boston conference. It was serendipitous to find that she (now Dr Faith Rohrbach) was the scholar who had written her doctoral dissertation on the religious-liberty thinking of John Courtney Murray which I'd earlier found helpful in understanding his fellow-Catholic, Lord Acton. She had only recently initiated an event to revive this Seminary's memory of Nolde. For nearly twenty years, Nolde had been written out of the UN's history, and of the World Council's history, and even of this Seminary's own history.

So I came. It was exciting that I was able to meet some of Nolde's former pupils and colleagues (and especially Jack Reumann). More important still, I was introduced to Nolde's second wife Nancy, then still living in the family home in Wyndmoor nearby. She, too, has had a long career in ecumenical ministry, both in the Communications department of the WCC at Geneva and – after her husband's retirement and death - here in Philadelphia. Her friendship and energy has been vital to the work that led to my book [*For all peoples and all nations: the ecumenical church and human rights*, Georgetown University Press 2005] on the early years of Nolde's international work. More recently – with the encouragement of President Philip Krey – she and the Nolde family have led the way in establishing an endowment here of a pattern of course-work (including a period in the UN at New York) and a convocation named for Fred Nolde in alternating years. We celebrate the achievement of its first complete cycle today. I do not know any other institution of Christian scholarship of any denomination in any country that has chosen to

give such attention to the field of 'global order' in its ministerial training. I congratulate you.

I cannot imagine any recognition of Nolde's work that would have given him such satisfaction. From his arrival here as a student in 1920 until his retirement in 1969 he defined himself by his membership of this collegiate community in this place. Hobnobbing with world leaders, he customarily introduced himself as Dean of the Graduate School of this seminary.

## **B. 1945: Hiroshima and the UN Charter**

What I actually know about Nolde is centered on the period up to 1948, when late in the evening of the 10<sup>th</sup> of December in Paris the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was finally ratified by the General Assembly of the United Nations. I trust God will bless all the celebrations you and your congregations are planning for that 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary on Wednesday of next week. None of us should forget that the only states of the world that even abstained – none voted against it – were the Soviet-led Communist bloc, Saudi Arabia, and apartheid South Africa. We have always known why. It remains a genuinely global event, freely voted. However, none of us should be surprised that its working out is still so partial and open to self-interest and hypocrisy. The world's politicians of 'national interest' are congenitally more vulnerable to sin than the rest of us: to an extent they have to be in order to survive.

Famously, Eleanor Roosevelt spoke of the Universal Declaration as a Magna Carta moment for all mankind. Perhaps Americans should realize more vividly than I think you do what a leap beyond evidence it was in the 1620s to claim Magna Carta's home territory should include Massachusetts, across the Atlantic. As Chancellor of Lincoln Cathedral in the 1980s I was responsible for the care of one of the four extant original manuscripts of the 1215 charter. At the Bicentenary of the American Constitution we paraded that quasi-sacred text from city to city. The memory of tears of joy on the faces of minority ethnic-Americans who filed past its case is still vivid. That in turn was a leap beyond your Founding Fathers' evidence. What if Eleanor Roosevelt was on to something that most other delegates to the 1948 UN Assembly would never have spoken of – at least in that way? It was certainly going to be a leap beyond evidence to speak of all mankind. The media headlines 60 years ago spoke of an opposite dynamic, of the Berlin airlift and the fracturing apart of the world. Yet to speak of 'mankind' is what Eleanor Roosevelt and Nolde and many others in the UN Human Rights Commission had dared to do.

Nolde and his colleagues spent much energy over the two years of drafting and re-drafting the Universal Declaration. They frequently said they were only tidying up and clarifying what the 1945 San Francisco Conference on International Order – to give it its full title – meant by adopting the phrase 'human rights'. Did anybody know the answer to that simple question? It was profoundly important - and difficult - to find out. The UN

Charter had announced that post-war international order was to be based on the values indicated by 'human rights'. But what are they? – and not only 'for all peoples and all nations', but these rights had to be **owned by** them. It was never going to happen tomorrow. Even sixty years on, we should on no account give up. Our present world still has not grasped the extent to which 1945 (with its postscript in 1948) genuinely was an epochal moment of change. If we want a symbol, 'Hiroshima' should work. From that day in August it had become clear that any future for human cultures had to be thought through and put into effect at a global as well as at national levels.

I only have a general sense of Nolde's life from 1948 to 1968. So far as I know, no one has used the resource of archives at the World Council of Churches in Geneva to find out. Maybe someone here has the vocation to begin. He and his English colleague in the leadership of the CCIA, Kenneth Grubb, had to choose from a bewildering variety of problems – all dangerous – on which to seek to bring the influence of the world's Protestant churches to bear. Granted that much, clearly, was not done that ought to have been done, it is hard to quarrel with their decision to focus their always limited energy on the Cold War. The two of them made a point of being present as familiar persons with carefully prepared texts at its confrontational meetings and conferences. They addressed what was practically possible. Nolde pressed his old comrade, Secretary of State Dulles, never to lose sight of the day when the USA and the USSR would need to find each other as friends. It is more than possible that their persistent doorstep-witness during 'summit' discussions on future testing of nuclear weapons had an effect. We should remember that the WCC and the International Missionary Council, which CCIA was representing, were then among the very few truly global 'civil society' bodies – with a far wider base than the Protestant churches of NATO states.

Near the end of his career in the WCC, Nolde was asked to give the 1965 Rauschenbusch Lectures at Colgate-Rochester Divinity School, New York. Their thrust was a heartfelt plea that Christian churches – even in their local congregations – recognize that since Hiroshima they can longer 'think as a child'; that all nations now live in a 'global era'. Maybe some of us prefer not to accept - in Nurse Cavell's words in 1915 – that 'patriotism is not enough', but that is the reality within which adult decisions need to be taken. Rauschenbusch had claimed in 1889 that 'there must be an inter-penetration of church and state': Nolde claimed in 1965 to be 'confident that if he were living now, he would expand his thesis to include the inter-penetration of the life of church and inter-governmental organisation'. Globalisation has now become a white-water process. There is no place to hide – most obviously not from global warming. We now have a Kingdom-responsibility with no limit short of God's world. From before the WCC's Vancouver Assembly in 1983, this has become explicit as the true sense of a genuinely 'ecumenical' project. Nolde's was a properly Rauschenbuschian message. One of Nolde's successors as Director of the CCIA is currently working on Nolde's drafts for these lectures and wonders whether – worked up - they might still find a readership.

### **C. Fred Nolde**

I was told some of you here might value a sketch of Nolde's personality. As you can well imagine, I have often wondered what made Fred Nolde tick. I feel I got to know him - up to a point. But I more and more came to suspect that, however much a 'hail fellow well met' in the bars of the UN, he remains a very private person. I've spoken to a good many men and women who knew him well, and worked with him. Sadly, several who were specially close died between my voyage of exploration here in 1990 and my beginning work after retirement in 1997. I would like to make some more or less educated guesses about how he was able to become a man who changed the world. Fred Nolde **did** change the world, and by 'world' I mean the global secular world. I suppose Benjamin Franklin did too, but who else from this proud city? I repeat: it was Nolde who convened the 30-minute meeting with Stettinius at San Francisco in May 1945 which decided a commitment to human rights in the Charter of the United Nations; it was Nolde who was responsible for the text of Articles 18 and 19 on religious freedom and access to information in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; it was Nolde who made available to the world ecumenical movement an instrument - the CCIA - for its use in international affairs.

Who could possibly have foreseen that? Until the United States entered the Second World War in December 1941, I came across zero evidence that he or - more importantly - this seminary had any interest at all in the galloping crisis in world affairs that so exercised Union Theological Seminary in New York throughout the 1930s. There, in the pit of the depression, the faculty had agreed to take a cut in salary in order that Paul Tillich (the first man to be expelled from Germany by Hitler, and with minimal English) might be offered a job as their colleague.

I suggest that Nolde's sudden vocation, for it clearly deserves to be counted as that, sprang from four sources. First, his colleague Ted Tappert had only narrowly got back out of Nazi Germany to the safety of campus as peace ended in Europe in September 1939. Second, the University of Pennsylvania had become notably international-minded in the late 1930s, and half of Nolde's employment then was as a faculty member of its School of Education. Third, he knew his post in the university was about to be abolished due to new state-legislation on the teaching of religion in schools. Fourth, my hunch is that Nolde's first wife Ellen-Jarden, who all her life was a follower of international affairs, had been involved (together with many of her fellow-Presbyterians in Philadelphia) in staffing the Federal Council of Churches' first National Study Conference on International Affairs there in the summer of 1940. I suspect too that it was then that some of the younger faculty in this seminary decided it was time for it to make a contribution to the world outside. His colleagues came to take on more and more of Nolde's seminary duties, as he was freed to roam the world. Students came to quip when a plane passed over: 'There goes Professor Nolde again!'

The second of these Study Conferences, at Delaware Ohio in March 1942, was Nolde's launching pad into the career we celebrate today. In the same year he published *Christian World Action: the Christian Citizen builds for Tomorrow*. He had mastered his new brief

in double quick time. Every word in that punchy title – ‘Christian’, ‘World’, ‘Action’, ‘the Christian citizen’, ‘Builds’, ‘Tomorrow’ – counts. Another title, *The Christian Alternative to World Chaos* (1940), by Luman Shafer, an established ecumenical leader in New York, expresses the urgency that energized the setting-up by the Federal Council of Churches in that year of a Commission to study the Bases of a Just and Durable Peace.

What did Fred Nolde take with him into this new career-field from the first forty years of his life? I would draw attention to four very helpful skills. First, he had learned to get along with those different from himself. His unpretentious immigrant family had still spoken German at home, and he had experienced street-hostility in World War I. And in his formative adult years he had to live in two intellectual worlds – as the first social scientist on this seminary’s faculty, and as a religion specialist on the university faculty. Second, he was, all his life, a remarkable athlete, with the social savoir-faire and will-to-win that goes with that. Third, he admired practical effectiveness; he used his army service to become a good typist, and as a teacher he was known for mechanical tricks to aid his students’ memory. Later on, when his duty was to communicate to political leaders the position of the WCC churches on an issue, he took trouble to find out what pressures they themselves were under, and at what time of their day they would be most receptive to an approach. He was intolerant of church bodies that pontificated self-indulgently into the air three weeks after the secular body they hoped to influence had come to its decision. Fourth, his actual expertise was in the processes of education, opening and ordering students’ minds, moving in a professional way from the elementary to the advanced – he often said ‘controlling outcomes’. He lived in the high noon of social engineering.

These skills are not all that rare or unteachable. There must be more than a few in this seminary with them. I do not believe he was a poet or a lateral thinker or even uncommonly religious (though he was a recognizably Lutheran saint). But he caught a conviction of what living Christian churches were called to do in the opening moments of this globalised era, and worked out what changes were needed if they were to do it. And, like the King David celebrated in the end-verse of Psalm 78, he applied himself ‘prudently and with all his power’ to make that goal visible (if not yet in full working order) on earth. Anyone thinking of following in his footsteps however should note that, before committing himself to going to the Delaware Conference in 1942, he insisted on being promised that the Federal Council of Churches had committed to a ‘serious’ project. The track record of Protestant churches was ground for such caution. The practical success of ‘serious’ institutional commitment was soon illustrated in the course of the ecumenical movement’s decision to forward the setting up of the UN as a post-war ‘order’ of international affairs. A similar ‘seriousness’ marked its entry into the struggle against racism, to move the separate-but-equal and apartheid laws and conventions used by secular authority into the present world of President-elect Obama and ex-President Mandela.

#### **D. A Nolde-vocation for our churches today?**

The churches in the 1950s were only too aware of their own vulnerability in asking gospel-questions about 'us-first' national politics and black slavery. In our own time I suggest churches may be sensing a vocation to become 'serious' about the present economic and financial arrangements of the world. These too need to answer gospel-questions and be changed. In the wide field of greed and economic privilege – so close to our daily life - we have been vulnerable. Nonetheless, for example, the British churches' recent record in helping mobilize opinion behind the 'Make Poverty History' campaign has been worth celebrating. But in my judgment, moving to a global economic order capable of managing its task will be a long and painful struggle. Without the stamina and power that comes from religious conviction the project will fail.

There is in truth no way that global economic and financial life can be governed without first agreeing on what institutions have to be set up to begin to manage such accountability, and then establishing them. And how is such authority to be made to relate to political authorities? The UN's Human Rights bodies have been emasculated from inside – 'white-anted' we'd say in Australia - by precisely the states that have most to answer for at that bar. Perhaps the UN itself will need to be reformed first. After all, for the first ten years of its life, the UN's Economic and Social Council (to which the Human Rights Commission was responsible) was at the same level as its Security Council.

It is unlikely that the churches will concede that mere associations of players in the variety of international 'markets' can do the job, and require no outside involvement. The Archbishops of Canterbury and York have called the granting of absolute authority to a humanly reified global 'market' an instance of idolatry. We should note that in both Old and New Testament times idols (including 'divine' caesars) required sacrifices of valuable human property and of human lives – even of human consciences. No satisfactory freedom there then.

If the Christian churches agree – and there are many other voices in the public square saying this in 2008 – that a better way has to be found to structure global economic and financial life (and there is no other kind now), can we look to Nolde's life-work for help? In Nolde's own case, two voices from 1919-20 spelled out what the churches had to provide for him if he was to be effective, that is to say 'serious'. I point you to Appendix I in my book *For all peoples and all nations*, from the foundation of the CCIA in 1946. You will see that Joe Oldham recalled how the International Missionary Council (the morning star of the 20<sup>th</sup> century ecumenical movement) was dependent on the decision of the great Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 to appoint a Secretary to continue its work. And John Foster Dulles recalled how in the drafting of the disastrous Treaty of Versailles in 1919, there were many individual church-goers involved, but there was no churches-structured mechanism for an informed Christian influence. This now would point to the churches setting up an informed conversation about global markets, that led to their entrusting an agreed agenda to an appropriate officer and his/her staff, empowered to act on their behalf.

Following Nolde, such an office would cultivate familiarity with the range of current economic expertise, both practical and academic. Those involved would get to know the relevant players in international conferences personally. They would not pretend to have texts and technical solutions to offer. They would learn to live their lives according to the timetabling of these professionals. Many NGOs in this field now do this, and follow where the CCIA led. Perhaps there are now too many uncoordinated NGOs. Perhaps the churches no longer have bodies that are sufficiently heavyweight and representative and trans-national in these fields.

Perhaps – above all – the churches have still to work at the mobilization of public opinion of which they are capable. I have never forgotten the table prepared for the United States Congress in 1945 recording the reception of views from associations and individuals for and against membership of the UN, with an almost brutal preponderance of those in favour, who were drawn principally from the Protestant churches and the YM (and YW)CA. Also, as an educationist, Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was specially dear to Nolde's heart. It committed UN member-states to include human rights (which include economic articles) in their schools curricula. Few if any states have done so, and I have no evidence that church schools are different. This could be changed, given the will.

Of course, all this would cut no ice if churches had no worked-out sense of how Christian faith can properly relate to human rights issues in general. Theologians have work to do. There is ecumenical Christian agreement on the 'dignity' of each human being. Abject poverty and excessive social or national inequalities do not encourage 'dignity'. Much ought to be said about Jesus' determination to allow those he met to respond to him as fellow persons – not to overpower them. Christians can properly assert that such responses to God's grace are of absolute and universal importance: 'Choose Life'. So a degree of general human welfare and education is important if Jesus' gospel is to be communicated in Jesus' image. The 'people of God', from Moses on, have been given a broad sense of how to recognize a 'good society', and other faiths have comparable visions. What the ecumenical Christians of the 1940s called 'Christendom-thinking' accepted that in a global era there ought no longer to be faith-based states, but that world Christianity is required to ask for a specific set of rights in all states, **provided** those rights are equally available to all citizens, whatever their faiths. This is what any state signs up to in becoming a member of the UN – and Article 18 is a central element in that commitment. Whether that can hold today is becoming a more and more open question. The fundamental assumption of human rights thinking is of the divine and human imperative of hospitality, of being actively 'serious' that our neighbors (within reasonable limits) should be free and at ease with their life-situation. A Christian who follows St Paul is above all concerned that a neighbor's conscience should be so at ease. This is in my opinion a necessary development of the Golden Rule of 'do-as-you-would-be-done-by' recommended by Jesus (and indeed by many others).

## **E. Postlude**

At a formal Nolde occasion, it seems right to assert again the majestic paragraph he wrote for inclusion in the report of the Second Assembly of the WCC, held in 1954 in Evanston Ill. He acknowledged it as his own – a kind of Credo, an explanation of his life-commitment. His family chose to include it in his memorial service in the seminary chapel here. It runs:

This troubled world, disfigured and distorted as it is, is God's world. He rules, and over-rules, its tangled history. In praying "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven", we commit ourselves to seek earthly justice, freedom and peace for all men [and I am confident that if he were himself speaking here today, those words would run 'for all men and women']. Here as everywhere Christ is our hope.... The **fruit** [my emphasis] of our effort rests in His hands. We can therefore live and work as those who know that God reigns, undaunted by all the arrogant pretensions of evil, ready to face situations that seem hopeless and yet to act in them as men [and women] whose hope is indestructible.

[4,060 words]

John Nurser

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learn more about the Nolde Lectureship and Seminar, view a video of Canon Nurser's lecture and student responses online: <http://ltsp.edu/noldelecture>