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Book Review: Religion and the Politics of Tolerance. How Christianity Builds Democracy?

by Marie E. Eisenstein, Baylor University Press, Waco (Texas) 2008, pp. 172

This book is a passionate voice in the debate on religious tolerance and conservative Christians' political attitudes. The work is situated in the political context of the contemporary United States, where a dispute between progressive liberals and conservatives takes place on various levels of social and international policy (rights of homosexuals, stem cell research, right to abortion, justification of war in Iraq). Although these political cleavages seem common to all western democracies, the so-called neo-conservative revolution, revival of religious cults of different Christian denominations, widely examined usage of religious language by president George W. Bush and the Republican elites are usually ascribed to the United States. Some authors, mostly holding a liberal viewpoint, perceive American religiosity as a threat to democracy, its basic values such as tolerance, as well as to logics and science (e.g. the case of Christian Churches that demand elimination of theory of evolution from schools). They speak of two Americas: liberal East and West Coasts versus conservative South. Eisenstein's book is an interesting defence of the conservative Christian viewpoint as it presents a struggle of a political scientist who speaks against marginalising of these voices as out-of-date, intolerant, authoritarian, etc.

One of the liberal authors, Chris Hedges, published a book entitled "American fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America" in which he emphasized threats posed by the conservative Christians. According to the critiques, the driving force behind these sects' success is negative, as it refers to the post modern isolation, alienation, insecurity and fear that people experience. As Hedges stated in the cited book (2006: 21), "within this mass of divergent, fractious and varied groups is this group of powerful Christian denominationists who have latched on to the despair, isolation, disconnectedness and fear that drives many people into these churches". Eisenstein's view is opposite and her intention is to defend the thesis which is already included in the title: Christianity builds democracy. She says that only people who adhere to certain values can be tolerant whereas people who do not respect any values cannot be tolerant. She cites surveys stating that believers are generally happier than non-believers and thus imagines faith as a positive choice of individuals.

Eisenstein conducted a research in the county of Indiana using mostly quantitative techniques, combined with one qualitative technique, namely a group

focus interview. According to her results, the religious people fully respect the values of liberal democracy and are reconciled with the democratic procedures. According to her beliefs, one can fully support tolerance and democracy while simultaneously rejecting certain homosexuals' privileges or women's right to abortion as long as this denunciation is expressed through procedures proper to democracy. Being deeply entrenched in a particular American context, the author criticizes "Jeffersonian enlightenment" and the Jefferson's idea of "wall of separation between religion and state". She argues that religious people can foster progressive changes in the state and consequently brings as examples Martin Luther King, Quaker Protest against slavery or Catholic movements for workers' welfare. In the U.S. Christian religions, thanks to their multiplicity and coexistence, did not promote intolerance, as for instance in some European countries where one denomination grasped hegemony.

The author's thesis is that deeply religious people are more than often not Amish-type communities critical of technologies and modern life, but "ordinary" contemporary people that go shopping to malls, listen to pop music and experience the same anxieties as others. Moreover, she suggests that people who consider themselves religious might be more eager to render voluntary services and more tolerant towards atheists than the atheists towards them. She also argues that increased education leads to more religious commitment.

In particular, Eisenstein wants to challenge three types of, what she considers, prejudices against conservative Christians. The first one, called "sectarian bias", contains all types of comparisons of conservative Christians with radical Muslims expressed in critical expressions such as "Christian fundamentalists" which depicts them as intolerant "crusaders". In her focus research, the author found out, that conservative Christians do not see any authority higher than the American government and do not promote any other form of government than the democracy. She opposes division of Christian denominations, churches and practitioners into "good ones" accepting women and gay rights as well as other "progressive" viewpoints, and those "bad ones" which with their conservative views are seen by some intellectuals as "detrimental to democracy". What author dislikes the most is a formulation of opinions about an intolerant character of Christianity as a whole based on an observation of some individuals or groups.

The second bias called "reason or rationality bias" employs rational choice theory in order to disapprove of religion due to its "irrational" nature. She believes that religious commitment can be rationally justified. The third bias, called psychological, consists of all the theories that seek root of religious commitment in personality features, such as Adorno's concept of "authoritarian personality" of the religious. It also includes opinions such as one about eagerness of believers to accept external powers as their lack of belief in one own talents. Eisenstein said herself, that "it is extremely difficult to overcome the perception that only weak or those with some type of personality or societal problems would choose religious belief or activity, even among educated citizens (p. 127)". The author concludes that the Founding Fathers as well as presidents of the U.S. were declared Christian practitioners and there is no problem of intolerance or rebellion against liberal democracy among Christians. Moreover, she claims that liberal democracy and capitalism are positive outcomes of Christianity. It was the American Revolution started by people respecting religion that gave birth to democracy – she argues - and not the violent French Revolution set off by opponents of religion. Eisenstein recalls the figure of John Locke, a 17th century English philosopher and a Christian practitioner, who spread the concept of natural rights of individuals. The author

comes even to dubious conviction that “only in countries and continents influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition has science, economic advancement, technology, and finally, liberal democracy been established for any long-term duration” (p. 124).

The book lacks qualitative research or ethnography which could portray the viewpoint of conservative Christians and their lifestyle, how they combine traditional convictions with demands of modern life, how their children socialize, etc. The author limited herself to respondents' views on "faith and democracy" issues. When it comes to quantitative research it might be easily questioned as not representative for entire country as her data were collected in one single county. The author seems radical in her views and often does not provide enough arguments to support them. The vision offered by Eisenstein seems to be not less subjective and unfortunately biased than of the authors that she fiercely criticizes as she presents a priori one-sided positive assessment of historic and contemporary role of Christian groups in U.S. According to me, the author did not pay enough respect to the others' serious arguments but simply refuted most general opinions that might be harmful to the American believers. Is it an utterly unacceptable attitude of social scientists to look for psychological, sociological or economic factors in increase of religiosity? For sure the author is right in reminding us that religiosity awakes altruistic attitudes but generally there is the "bright" side and "dark" side of religious commitment which should be equally explored. In the end, the Ku Klux Klan, Confederation supporters and other fanatics exist among Christian conservative even if they are small minority but their attitudes can awake some concerns. The author did not deal with the concerns which have been globally awakened by the employment of religious language by American government to justify its political and military goals. Some questions raised in this book mostly refer to values, which is the domain of politics. For example, it is politics not science that can give answers to important questions such as whether democracy should give full freedom to its critiques.

References

Hedges, Chris (2006) *American fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*, New York: Free Press.

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