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SOCIAL WORK AND THE POLITICS OF MULTICULTURALISM: ETHNIC IDENTITY AND BEING HUMAN

Though the term is difficult to define, multiculturalism, in essence, is a socio-political ideal that seeks to appreciate, respect, and protect disparate ethnic groups within a unified society, all under the guise of tolerance. How societies attain such an ideal is a rather contentious subject as numerous strategies have been advocated. Social work, particularly international social work, wrestles with the chameleon “politics of recognition” that demands equal rights based on ethnicity. It is argued, according to Charles Taylor, that misrecognition distorts one’s personal identity and is thus a form of oppression, sequestering people into a distorted mode of existence. In order to alleviate such oppression, we must “recognize” particular groups and afford them equal rights to ensure that various ethnic groups have the opportunity to reach their potential (Taylor 1994). Consequently, social workers are faced with accounting for “the other” in their theories, methodologies, and praxis, requiring an expanded base of knowledge and ethnic specific competencies. Furthermore, such plurality, it is often presumed, leads to a relative basis for defining social values, thereby undermining any sort of normative ethic for attaining justice for or intervening on behalf of the disenfranchised. Should ethnicity, though, be the fundamental criteria for defining what it means to be human?

The intent of this paper seeks to address a theoretical concern confronting social work in general and international social work in particular, namely to situate the politics of recognition within a larger framework of what it means to be human. In other words, the call to recognize various disparate ethnic groups within a society is actually an expression of a more complex, fundamental, and profound human need—the need for acceptance and belonging within human society. This need at its core is a religious need that finds expression in an I-Thou relationship, as Martin Buber suggests (Buber 1970). Hence, “every people, even the very smallest, represents a unique facet of God’s design,” whereby “you shall love all other people as your own,” as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn contends (Solzhenitsyn 1991, 23). Such a theological argument rejects a variety of egoisms (e.g., race, class, culture) and calls for a sense of humility where one’s “respect and pride [for one’s culture],” according to Steven Rockefeller, “grow out of recognition of the value of the uniqueness in the identity of all other peoples and life forms” (Rockefeller 1994, 88).

The formation of human identity, then, is dynamic, dialogical, and relational rather than static, monological, and individualistic. To the extent that social work consumes itself with the particularities of the politics of recognition without situating them within a broader understanding of human being, social work will find itself mired in power schemes and capitalistic economic structures where human beings are viewed as individual consumers and customers rather than relational creatures of intrinsic worth that possess a sacred life. This paper hopes to shift the focus of the debate by creating linguistic space for an interdisciplinary conversation on the nature of human being. By engaging in this conversation, perhaps we will better understand our differences, and more importantly, what binds us together as human beings.

Key Words: multiculturalism, ethnicity, human being, social work, social values, theology

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