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Book Review: Stephen Hopgood, 'Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International'

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Stephen Hopgood
Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International

Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2006. Pp. vi, 249. Paperback.

Amnesty International (AI) is one of the three most important non-governmental human rights monitors in the world; only Human Rights Watch (HRW) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are in serious global competition with it for reach, comprehensiveness, and reputation. Its pronouncements on human rights, its investigative reports and annual report are all routinely front page news in leading newspapers of Europe and the United States. AI's history has been recounted many times, in many books, starting from the story of its modest founding in 1961 by a British lawyer, Peter Benenson, driven by a mission to see to political prisoners – prisoners of conscience, in the now universal phrase - and to oppose the death penalty, to today's rather considerable bureaucracy at AI's International Secretariat (IS) in London and the organization's national branches with thousands of mostly middle class members in the West. What Stephen Hopgood does in this engaging book is treat the IS as a site for anthropological fieldwork deep into the institution and its culture.

This anthropological approach to AI works in large part because, as Hopgood notes, AI is a kind of secular religion with a distinctive culture all its own. It has a body of quasi-religious beliefs, a mission and a mandate that would seem largely familiar, in attitude at least, to the long line of British moral and religious reformers of the previous two centuries. Those of us who have ever had direct dealings with AI have always understood that, like a religion, and like HRW and the ICRC, it is as much a religious society, a monastic order or religious community, as a body of doctrine. This means that getting inside the organization and describing what life is like, the many contradictory and difficult pressures on the staff of AI, the theological debates over mandate and mission, the tug and pull of being, as it were, in the world but not of it – of trying to cobble together enough money on an AI salary to feed and clothe your children and, eventually, retire – all that is remarkably hard to penetrate, on the one hand, and hard to convey to outsiders, on the other. Hopgood has done an outstanding job at both tasks – getting inside and conveying the contradictory impulses driving the institution. In my career, I have been a senior staffer at a similar organization of secular human rights religion, HRW, and someone in close contact for years with staff of the IS (and, for that matter, a religious missionary as well); I know the inside that Hopgood seeks to convey, and in my view his is the best of any account currently available.

But *Keepers of the Flame* also performs well on a quite different, more abstract and more intellectual agenda. The book is more than simply accomplished journalism; Hopgood also does a fine job in conveying the deep debates that motivate the organization, across time and in its current form. They are much more than simply

internal NGO theology; they are practical instantiations of deep philosophical questions in ethics and political theory. AI has struggled with the fundamental question of how far should a supposedly universal, mandatory, essentially Kantian categorical agenda, extend in a world characterized by tradeoffs, resource constraints, plural and conflicting values, and different conceptions of the good. Hopgood shows the ways in which AI has largely given up trying to keep the idea of a body of universal human rights – applicable in all circumstances categorically – separate from distributive prescriptions for society. It has, on these issues, so extended itself further and further with the passing years that, to this outsider's eyes, at least, it looks less like a human rights organization than simply a social advocacy group for particular, indeed promiscuous conceptions of social justice that uses, quite wantonly, universal human rights language to frame distributive demands. Hopgood observes in exquisite anthropological detail how this ideological expansion has led to internal dissension and debate within AI over whether it has strayed from its original mission, and whether that ought to matter.

The distributional questions – the questions of economic and social rights – are not the only ones that matter in today's world. AI has had to confront both the US response following 9-11 and the global growth of Muslim pressure to reframe human rights to become a rhetorical vehicle for its religious demands (on display in such venues as the UN Human Rights Council, dominated by the Islamic Conference, with pressures, for example, to curtail traditional liberal free speech in the name of protecting religious expression). This has led to a curious doctrinal gap. On the one hand, AI has ferociously attacked the US on grounds of the most traditional civil and political rights –

Guantanamo, principally. On the other hand, with respect to global Muslim sensibilities, AI has rather signally failed to hold those civil and political rights at the center of its critiques; it has been remarkably supine with respect to the traditional Western liberal line on human rights and toward the value of free expression in particular. And not very many outside observers would dispute that, in the internal and global politics of the organization and its national branches, anti-Americanism and anti-Israel feelings within the membership of the organization are considerable; a sharp debate is underway as to whether that affects its formal human rights reporting.

AI's embrace of ideologies of decolonialization over traditional liberal conceptions of civil and political rights is so marked that in many respects, Hopgood's account might be thought to show (although he himself holds back from going there), that the future of AI, as with other leading human rights monitors, is less the theology of international liberalism that gave birth to these organizations and their missions than a new theology of international multiculturalism, framed however in the absolutist, categorical, uncontestable language of human rights. A question that therefore lurks not far beneath the surface of this book – implicit in the internal complaints of AI staff that Hopgood documents so well, but not openly expressed because, presumably, it is heresy – is whether those for whom human rights are those traditionally endorsed and understood in the liberal Western tradition, but which have been systematically abandoned by AI as it has embraced fashionable agendas of multiculturalism and so many other things, will finally need new institutions and new organizations to monitor and defend them.

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