Book Review. Liberty: Rethinking an Imperiled Ideal by Glenn Tinder

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Glenn Tinder has written an uncommonly important book. It is a big book about big ideas. It is a book about liberty, broadly understood, and a range of related topics. It is about faith and reason, dialogue and community, evil and suffering, love and hope, truth and God. At bottom, it is about the meaning of human life, both individually and in common. This is not an easy volume, and its length and interrelated themes are daunting. But the book rewards the patient reader with rich and provocative insights and challenges.

Professor Tinder writes from a Christian perspective, but he continually engages and incorporates what he calls “humanist reason” as well. According to Tinder, Christianity is an inquiring faith that demands “universal conversation in search of the truth,” and he maintains that humanist reason should embrace an equally dialogic posture, engaging religious as well as secular thinking in a quest for common ground. More specifically, he contends that many of his arguments and conclusions can be supported not only by Christians and other religious believers, but also by secular thinkers.

According to Tinder, liberty is an “imperiled ideal” because its common justifications are inadequate, largely because they rest on unrealistic optimism concerning human nature and human possibilities. In reality, human nature is infected by what Christians call sin and what Kant called “radical evil,” a tendency driven by human finitude and evidenced, all too grimly, by the historical and continuing reality of the human experience. Liberty invites continuing sin and evil, making liberty an ongoing “ordeal.” But liberty is essential nonetheless because it opens the only possible pathway to good, this because nothing in human experience can be good unless it is freely chosen. According to Tinder’s “personalist” philosophy, persons are the primary reality and the primary value. More precisely, every person is of infinite value and demands equal dignity, without exception. And at the heart of personhood is human freedom. Persons are free ontologically; that is, they are freely choosing beings by their very nature. To deny them liberty is to deny their essential being and their human dignity. To grant them liberty is to affirm their humanity and to permit the possibility of
good—freely chosen good, because there is no other kind—however likely it may be that sin and evil will prevail instead.

In reality, few use liberty wisely, but liberty permits individuals to adopt “the liberal stance,” that is, to embrace liberty despite its unhappy consequences and to use liberty to seek and embrace the truth, a truth that goes hand in hand with righteous action. The liberal stance is an individual, “disencumbered” stance, one of personal conscience and personal responsibility, but one that demands communicative, dialogic engagement with others in the formation of community and in the search for truth. To have value, neither community nor truth can be coerced; they must be freely chosen. The interpersonal, communal quest for truth therefore embodies liberty and reflects the primacy of persons, with individuals working together and assisting others in the search. Accordingly, communication—on serious matters implicating questions of morality or meaning—is an expression of love and is “the primary work of liberty.” (164)

This serious dialogue—a dialogue that should be open to the claims of faith and reason alike—occurs mainly among living persons, often within small groups. It includes dialogue in the public realm, although the primary purpose of politics (as distinguished from the public realm generally) is more pragmatic: it establishes the liberal order within which the search for truth can be conducted. However unlikely it may seem, the search for truth extends to the entire world and to all humanity. It thus includes communication from the past to the present (through such means as the Bible and other texts) and on to the future. The final goals are nothing less than universal human community and a universal understanding and embrace of timeless, ultimate, and supreme truth. For Christians, this truth—this light—is God.

In the flesh-and-blood world in which we live, of course, the goals of universal community and ultimate truth are utterly unattainable, and any movement in those directions is likely to be, at best, partial and halting indeed. Sin and evil are too deep and too powerful. As a result, the liberal stance is simply that, a stance; in the “ordeal of liberty,” (45-50) meaningful progress toward community and truth are quite unlikely. Instead, we will witness ongoing sin and evil. At the same time, we will undergo personal suffering (some more than others) and will face the certainty of death. Even so, the liberal stance is one of genuine, unqualified hope, both for oneself and for humanity as a whole. How is this possible? In this world, it is not. Genuine hope requires a transcendent perspective and an eschatological vision. “What is beyond history,” writes Tinder, “renders life within history tolerable, and it does
this not by providing an escape from history but by giving history a final purpose and conclusion.” (363)

Ironically, personal suffering, however painful, can trigger hope by revealing the desolation of the world. It can lead to a hunger for real relationships and for truth-seeking communication even as it turns one’s eyes to the transcendent, to the mystery of being. To embrace hope for oneself is to understand that one’s personal future is not mere fate, but a realization of destiny, and that one’s ultimate destiny is to receive and impart the truth. To embrace hope for humanity is to envision the end of history, complete with universal truth and therefore universal righteousness. For Christians, these individual and global dimensions of hope are based on the redeeming power of Christ and on the Biblical promises of eternal life and of Christ’s Second Coming. Without hope, including eternal hope, one must live in despair. But with hope, one can thrive in freedom.

As the foregoing summary suggests, Professor Tinder focuses mainly on “the spirit of liberty,” as opposed to its letter. Even so, he also discusses the need for legally enforced limits on liberty, explaining how such limits can be defended in a manner that respects human dignity and personal freedom to the fullest extent practicable. More generally, the breadth of the book is striking. Throughout, Tinder confronts an array of secular and religious thinkers, including, among many others, Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, Kant, Mill, Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Barth, and Buber. In so doing, Tinder models the dialogic posture that he advocates. Non-dogmatic Christians are likely to find Tinder’s posture attractive and his book enlightening. Perhaps more interesting, Tinder conspicuously invites non-Christians and nonbelievers to take his arguments seriously.

As Tinder suggests, some of his arguments might well appeal to secular thinkers. For example, some might accept the reality of radical evil and the importance of Socratic dialogue in an ongoing search for truth. In important respects, however, Tinder’s book is a challenge to secular thinkers. He dismisses common secular arguments for liberty as impoverished and unpersuasive. He argues, for example, that social contract arguments strip liberty of its moral significance and implicitly rest on an inflated view of human nature. Likewise, he rejects utilitarian arguments concerning appropriate limits on liberty, including the arguments of Mill. Utilitarianism is flawed because human dignity demands that persons never be treated merely as means, no matter the gain to others. Contrary to Mill, moreover, harm to oneself is the concern of all, and harm to others, without more, does not justify
coercion, because coercion must be in service of liberty itself. These arguments warrant serious attention and serious responses.

More fundamentally, Tinder’s overall thesis rests on premises that cannot easily be explained in secular terms. Two are basic. First, Tinder’s personalist defense of liberty rests on the infinite value of every person and on the human dignity of each, without exception. Christians readily can accept this view. Indeed, as Tinder maintains, “Christianity is radically personalist” (105) because it is rooted in the incarnation of Christ. Personalism likewise can and does appeal to other religious believers, at least those who accept the idea of God as a divine creator, one who created every person in the image of God. As Tinder suggests, secular thinkers often accept the idea of equal human dignity, and, indeed, the proposition “[t]hat every person without exception must be respected is probably the central principle of Western morality.” (118) Yet this principle might collapse without express or implicit religious support, because it is not clear that secular reason, standing alone, can defend or justify the idea of human dignity for all. “Almost without exception,” writes Tinder, “[humanists] deny God and affirm personal dignity. Does this make sense? No question before us at the outset of the third millennium is more urgent than this one.” (119)

Second, Tinder’s vision of transcendent, eschatological hope, which is essential to his overall argument, is inescapably religious. To be sure, as Tinder explains, transcendence is not confined to Christianity or theism, and traces of eschatology can be found elsewhere—for example, in the life and death of Socrates, in Kant’s “kingdom of ends,” and in the Enlightenment’s “idea of progress.” But the ordeal of liberty demands that the end of history be meaningful, not accidental, and—given “the extremity of the human plight” (368)—it is doubtful that secular thinking is up to the task. There must be eternal hope, which realistically can be grounded only upon an anticipated “intervention from without,” something that is “God’s doing rather than man’s.” (368) For Christians, this means that “[h]istory leads toward and into eternal life.” (368) Secular thinkers might find glimmers of eternal hope in temporal realities—in things of beauty, for instance, or in acts of virtue or love. But can they fully embrace the liberal stance, living fearless lives of freedom? Conversely, if secular thinkers have “a clear mind, but no hope for anything beyond the world and history,” is Tinder right to suggest that they “must live in despair”? (389) These, too, are urgent questions, questions that secular thinkers would do well to confront and address.
There is a risk that Tinder’s central claims—including his provocative appeals to secular thinkers—may be lost in the book’s many pages. More generally, this work may not be widely read because of its length and complexity. An important strength of the book—its broad scope, including its engagement with a wide range of secular and religious thinking—might also be its primary weakness. The volume is clearly written, but its nearly four hundred pages of text (the book contains no footnotes) are packed full of abstract and challenging ideas. And the book’s interconnections give rise to some repetition, with the author presenting the same or similar arguments in the course of discussing distinct but related concepts.

Whatever its weaknesses, this book deserves to be read and studied, not only by Christians and other religious believers, but also by nonbelievers. Just as his argument demands, Professor Tinder asks all persons, religious and nonreligious alike, to join him in a dialogic search for truth. He awaits our response—with low expectations for human progress, but with eternal hope.

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