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Review of Globalizing Family Values: The Christian Right in International Politics, by Doris Buss and Didi Herman

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DORIS BUSS AND DIDI HERMAN

Globalizing Family Values: The Christian Right in International Politics

Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003. xxxvii + 197 p. \$18.95 (pbk.).

The Christian Right that is the focus of attention by Buss and Herman is an American amalgamation of conservative Protestant, neoconservative Catholic, and conservative Mormon organizations that came together after the United Nations Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (1994). Their goal is to combat the “global liberal agenda” being promulgated by “radical feminists,” “secular humanists,” “globalists,” and “socialists” at UN conferences. The authors see the Vatican as providing informal leadership to the “Christian Right UN,” although they do not consider it a formal component of the movement. The Vatican’s actions at Cairo served as “a clarion call” for Christian Right organizations, which previously had avoided the international arena, to mobilize and defend nation, family, and faith at UN conferences. Small contingents of “Christian Right UN” advocates were present at the UN’s 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995). By 1999 the movement was robust enough to sponsor a “World Conference on the Family” in Geneva aimed at forging a global alliance among conservative Christians, Jews, and Muslims and providing it with a clear agenda for use at international meetings: defense of “the natural family.” At the Beijing +5 meetings in 2000 the Christian Right UN entered into pitched battles with feminist and women’s groups in an attempt to revisit the language on women’s health and sexual and reproductive rights adopted at the 1995 Beijing Conference. Although no major reworking of women’s-rights language occurred, the Beijing +5 meetings marked the coming of age of the Christian Right UN as a major player on the international scene.

Buss and Herman—law professors at Carleton University (Ottawa) and Keele University (United Kingdom), respectively—begin their account of the rise of the Christian Right UN movement with several chapters on the theological grounding of ideas central to the movement. They examine the biblical basis of the “natural family” notion and outline the different perceptions of the United Nations held by premillennial and postmillennial Christians. The discussion of millennialism is overlong, but does serve to explain why many in the Christian Right view “global space” at the present time as being controlled by anti-Christian forces that seek to undermine the family and Christianity. Chapter 4 (“The death culture goes global”) treats the Cairo Conference and the formation of international population policy, and Chapter 6 (“The gender agenda”) treats the Beijing and the Beijing +5 conferences on women. These chapters are likely to be of particular interest to readers of this journal. The authors present a subtle analysis of the rhetoric employed by the Christian Right UN, much of it first elaborated by the Vatican, to attack the “radical feminism” it sees embedded in the Program of Action adopted at Cairo and in the declarations on women’s rights approved at Beijing. The Christian Right UN forgoes crude anti-women’s rights declarations in favor of more refined assertions that exploit North/South tensions. The Concerned Women for America, for instance, brand population stabilization efforts “imperialist” and a new form of “colonialism” by those who want to impose “their own misguided worldview on developing nations by denigrating marriage and families, and encouraging promiscuous sexual

behavior" (p. 76). Old-time observers of UN population conferences might find it incongruous to hear the radical feminist critiques of population control voiced at the 1974 Bucharest Conference on Population reemerging from the mouths of Christian Right advocates in the late 1990s, but framing messages that resonate with target audiences is a measure of the movement's political sophistication. Similarly, Buss and Herman do an excellent job of clarifying the Vatican's construction of a "pro-woman" position for itself that is distinct from Western feminism. The feminists' call for "equality" and "equal rights" for women is countered by a Vatican emphasis on the essential uniqueness of each sex and their "complementarity." The Vatican asserts that equal "dignity" ought to be accorded each sex, but not necessarily equal treatment. The authors chart the Vatican's attempt to marginalize feminism by framing it as a Western-dominated movement that relies on a limited "rights" discourse which has never served the interests of women of the South and which does an increasingly poor job of serving the interests of women of the North as well. The authors offer insight into the recent concerted Christian Right assault on homosexuality. Members of the Christian Right believe that feminists and homosexuals have entered into a fundamental alliance. Their proof is feminists' efforts to insert the term "gender" into UN documents, a move they see as an attempt to replace the two biological sexes with five socially constructed genders: male, female, gay, lesbian, and transgendered. In this view "gender" becomes a code word for homosexual rights, and feminists and homosexuals become major proponents of the "culture of death" that advocates divorce, birth control, abortion, homosexuality, and euthanasia. The Christian Right conflates feminists and homosexuals into a single enemy with a common project of undermining marriage and "the natural family," an enemy that needs to be confronted at UN conferences and elsewhere.

The authors are not primarily interested in documenting the formation of the Christian Right UN movement, or in measuring its successes or failures. Their main goal is to uncover the beliefs that led to its formation and to decode its rhetoric. For those interested in tracking the rhetorical battles that UN conferences on population and women have become, this book is a valuable guide. Buss and Herman trace seven years (1994 to 2001) of the thrusts and counter thrusts by the Christian Right UN and its international opponents. A measure of how well the authors tell their story is that many readers upon finishing the work will no doubt hasten to the Internet sites of the key Christian Right UN organizations discussed by them—Concerned Women for America (www.cwfa.org/main.asp), the Family Research Council (www.frc.org/), the World Family Policy Center (www.worldfamilypolicycenter.org/), the Catholic Family and Human Rights Institute (www.c-fam.org/), and the Population Research Institute (www.pop.org/index.cfm)—to monitor their evolving strategy.