Carter Challenges Audience to Enhance Rights of Children

by Martin E. Marty

Former President Jimmy Carter made use of a forum on “What Happens to Children in Peril?” to review his lifelong commitments to children, especially those imperiled, and then to look into the future. In a conversation-interview at Emory University School of Law in Atlanta on October 14 he made a major contribution to the probes by the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Religion (CISR) into the worlds of children as these relate to law, religion, and society.

Privileged to be his interlocutor, which meant mainly to be the setter of the stage, I was able to satisfy some of my own curiosities as he ministered to the large audience. Expression of that curiosity began with questions about his own childhood. These inquiries were not out of line, since he had written an autobiography which opened the door to further pursuit. He described his own awakening to “peril” when, after several years of childhood in which he had known only black playmates, he and they were introduced to the world of segregation when, for instance, they would attend movies and have to part for seating along the lines of their skin color.

Pleasant as it might have been to linger over that boyhood and the stages along the way toward his governorship of Georgia, his presidency of the United States, and his Nobel Peace Prize Laureate status, it seemed urgent to come to a discussion of what imperilment means, why it exists, what some people—including those at the Carter Center in Atlanta—do to make some difference.

Two themes emerged: children are in peril, as he had many occasions to observe in Atlanta neighborhoods and the Georgia he governed, because they lacked rights, were mired in poverty, often did not experience adult care, and had little access to the goods of an affluent society. No surprise there, of course; the audience knew all that. What was of more interest was his address to the situation. The White House gave him more, but still limited opportunities, to face the problem of children in peril on a national scale. President Carter warmed to the conversation most when discussing his work in developing nations, especially in Africa, after having left public office.

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While the Carter Center, cooperating with both religious and secular philanthropic and “hands on” agencies and partners, has done much by way of providing immediate relief, it was
clear that the President’s dissatisfaction, even ire, increased as he dealt with U. S. government policies, or absence of policies. These exacerbate situations that lead to imperilment, or make it worse. As a most vivid example he, and some audience members who spoke up, focused on the United States’ failure to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. He was most concerned, one might almost say outraged, over a reason given for the United States, at the side of only Somalia, to withhold its signature from the treaty: that this nation still believes in the death penalty for children.

On issue upon issue, score upon score, President Carter challenged the audience [now enlarged because of webcast available at www.law.emory.edu/cISR] and the government to take positive steps to advance development and enhance the rights of children. He pointed to the low ranking of the United States in respect to expenditures for foreign aid, especially as it relates to children, among the nations. Citizens need to revise their self-image as members of a generous nation, President Carter charged.

While in a challenging mood, he also looked at an audience of the Law school and showed awareness of the presence of academics from Candler School of Theology at Emory: could not one Law school somewhere put its energies into work to change laws which are manifestly unfair to the poor and especially poor children? Could not the clergy help members reach out from what he called their “cocoons” and live up to the demands and promises of their sacred texts, to intervene where matters of justice, rights, and more than subsistence living were concerned?

Along the way the President set out to unsettle academics, including his interviewer and those involved with the Project on the Child in Law, Religion, and Society, that they might reach beyond the mere study and writing of books and articles. In a more leisurely setting I might have raised a peep to speak up for additional biblically mandated ways to be of service, depending upon one’s calling—in this case, calling to scholarship, to trust that the printed page can also help change the world. But such demurrings would have been out of place on an afternoon when the experience, passion, moral exemplarity and sense of direction by a senior statesperson were so evident and so evidently moving.

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