

## **The Right to Be Responsible**

### **Robert W. Bertram**

- 1) Human rights have acquired such compelling moral force in today's world that their rightness is recognized as virtually self-evident - without their first needing to be justified, say, in theology or natural law.
- 2) In fact, so ethically uncontested have human rights become that even oppressors, at least those who feel constrained to justify their oppression, must do so in the name of and under the guise of human rights.
- 3) Of all the human rights which are being asserted, perhaps none is so basic to all the rest (and therefore the slowest to be realized) as our right to share in those decisions which affect ourselves.
- 4) We might summarize that right this way: Whoever share in a decision should share in its consequences, and (at least as important) whoever bears the consequences of a decision should share in making that decision.
- 5) Few things in modern technological society have so threatened this right to decision-sharing as has the bureaucratic organizing of our workplaces, including academic and even ecclesiastical workplaces.
- 6) But so strongly have people at the grass-roots, the bureaucracies' "subordinates", insisted upon the right to "participatory" or "collegial" or "democratic" or "communitarian" decision-sharing that the very theorists of bureaucratic organization ("systems" theory, management by objectives", "conflict management", etc.) have themselves come to acknowledge this basic right, even within large-scale corporations— though usually not as the workers' or the students' or the faculty-members' "right" but merely (and more clinically) as their "felt need" or "expectation".
- 7) Granted, it was only a few short years ago that this demand for a larger share "in determining their own destiny" was still only that, a demand — "what we want" —a militant, obtrusive clamoring which could only be silenced with expedient concessions. "Responsible participation in decision making may, for many [young people], be a substitute for the violence that is born in frustration." (National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, 1969)
- 8) In the short time since then, however, this demand for participation has come to be recognized as an inherently moral right, and a right not only of blacks and the poor and the young but of many others besides who meanwhile have discovered that they too have been bearing the consequences of decisions which they themselves had had small share in making, and that for them to continue to acquiesce in such a role of dependency — however comfortable that might otherwise be — is simply not right.
- 9) Of course, this right to "responsible participation in decision-making" is hardly a new discovery or even a discovery of the modern, post-Enlightenment era. Already in the thirteenth century the Fourth Lateran Council could acknowledge that "what touches all, all must approve."

But the roots of this "right" date back far beyond medieval Christendom, to the history and literature of Scripture.

10) It is this rootedness in biblical tradition to which I would like to turn the discussion about the rights of participatory democracy, especially to the way in which that tradition revolutionizes what we call "rights" into what we might better call "responsibility" — than which there is nothing more precious in all of life for persons to treasure against oppressors who would pauperize and infantilize them.

Discussion begins at this point. All of the above is only prologue.