

Tales Of Hoffman

Mars Hill College Professor Discusses Tour Of South America, India

By WILLIAM LEE

For most of us, a trip abroad means taking hundreds of family snapshots posed in front of famous landmarks. Only the most observant tourist takes in the characteristics and differences between cultures.

For Dr. Richard Hoffman, a professor of political science and Assistant to the President at Mars Hill College, observing the differences of foreign cultures was the entire purpose of a recent twelve-week journey to India and South America. Taking a sabbatical leave after 25 years at Mars Hill College, Dr. Hoffman spent six weeks traveling through Peru and Chile, before flying on to India for another six weeks.

Dr. Hoffman took a close look at the problems facing our South American neighbors, in particular the changing role of the church. Today's church in South America, where the Catholic Church dominates, is taking a more active role in the problems of the lower classes in these lesser-developed nations.

"Where the church used to be a part of the status quo, it is showing a greater sympathy and responsibility to the plight of the poor," Hoffman explained. "Today's church feels it exists for the people rather than the other way around, as it often felt."

There are numerous other churches whose missionary philosophy still tends favors non-involvement in the social, economic, and political difficulties of host countries, Hoffman added. He neither condones nor condemns such church policy.

"There is certainly a place for individual salvation through prayer and religious faith," Hoffman says.

At the same time, Hoffman points to a grassroots movement in the churches, begun through the more liberal elements of its missionary work.

"Those missionaries closest to the people have revived a political awareness in the plight of the people down there."

The church community, therefore, is becoming the single most important force for change in South and Latin America, says Hoffman. The United States and its foreign policy could learn a lesson or two from the churches, Hoffman believes.

"The United States is only in contact with the governments, the military leaders, and the elite ruling class of these countries. We seem to have little concern for the lower classes," Hoffman explains. "We tend to support and prop up some of

the more repressive regimes in the world. The Somozas, the Marcos, and military juntas. It's no wonder the people feel abandoned by us," Hoffman continued.

A love-hate relationship exists between the people of Latin and South America and their feelings toward the U.S., Hoffman says. "They love our lifestyle, our wealth, our freedoms. It's our government they can't stand."

Hoffman found the situation in Chile "very repressive" with teachers at the universities afraid to speak out. Death squads still exist down there, Hoffman says, with the constant fear of someone coming for you late at night and spiriting you from your home.

He talked with a few of the younger children in a classroom at one of the schools. Through an interpreter, he asked the children, "If there was one thing I could do for you, what would it be?"

"Almost in unison they answered that they wanted to go to the United States."

"I asked them why they wanted to go there," Hoffman recalls, "and they replied, 'No libertante'."

His trip to India, however, proved to be as different as day and night.

The wealthy of South America, Hoffman says, show little concern for the impoverished, and only seek ways to secure their private riches. It is a tradition that has been carried on for more than 300 years, Hoffman says, dating back to the time of the Spanish conquistadors who stripped the land of its wealth and left nothing. That same attitude, get what you can, still continues.

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BACK HOME IN HIS MARS HILL OFFICE, Dr. Richard Hoffman discussed his recent trip to South America and India.

"In India, even the wealthiest citizens demonstrated to me a great concern for all the people," Hoffman explains. "They consider themselves as part of a greater picture, thinking in terms of India as a whole." Hoffman visited with Indian leaders such as B.K. Berle, the son of

Gandhi's financial minister, and Rama Krishna Baja, whose grandfather was a top adviser to Gandhi when India was seeking independence.

Both men, though extremely wealthy, have given their time and wealth to the feed and educate the Indian people, according to Hoffman.

"Their's is a total dedication to Indian advancement," Hoffman says. "Both being highly religious men of the Hindu faith, it is part of that faith's teaching that they get beyond the ego to the true self."

Hoffman says it is this Hindu faith, combined with a strong political system established by the British,

that gives India hope for the future.

With 89 percent of India's population Hindu, and only two percent Christian, the Christian church's influence is limited. Yet one person who Hoffman met had earned the love and admiration of the Indian people so deeply, that she is the second most respected person in India, next to Gandhi.

"Mother Teresa's work there seems endless," Hoffman said. "I made my way down to Calcutta, through masses of people that crowded the streets, to the Buddhist Center where she brings the old and dying out off the street."

"She grasped my hand," Hoffman

continued, "smiled, and said she was glad I was here. Quickly she was back to the sick and dying, offering comfort and prayer."

Despite the problems of overpopulation, the starving and the dying masses that flooded the streets of Calcutta, Hoffman still sensed a powerful influence at work. It was an almost mystical feeling that surrounded him.

Whereas South America showed him only the hopelessness, exploitation and terror of its people, Dr. Hoffman left India sensing a deep spiritual commitment from its ruling class as they reached down to pull its poor, and India as a whole, toward self-reliance.

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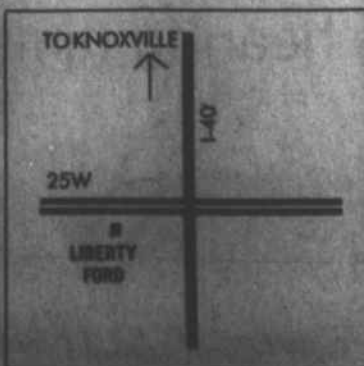
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