MBS Texte 125

Martin Bucer Seminar

6. Jahrgang
2009

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Rights, Religions, and Ideologies

Pro mundis

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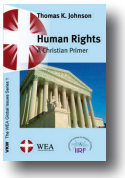

This text is an excerpt from the book
Human Rights: A Christian Primer
(Bonn: Culture and Science Pub., 2008).
Download: http://www.iirf.eu/index.php?id=95

International Institute for Religious Freedom
IIRF

1. Aufl. 2009

Rights, Religions, and Ideologies

Thomas K. Johnson

On Thursday, April 19, 2007, I opened my email, and I felt like someone had kicked me in the stomach. Terrorists had slit the throat of one of our seminary students; two of his colleagues suffered similar fates. Three men were dead, two of them Turkish, one German. Two wives were suddenly widows, and four young children had lost their fathers. They died because they were Christians; their place of death was a small Bible publishing house in Malatya, Turkey. The motives of their murderers probably arose from a mixture of nationalist ideology and the desire to enforce the demands of the Sharia, the Muslim law. Turkish nationalism says "Turkey is for Turks," with the assumption that a person who has become a Christian may no longer be a good Turk. The Muslim Sharia (at least the older interpretations of the Sharia now advocated by the new political Islam) requires the execution of men who commit treason against the community by converting from Islam to another religion, a crime of such severity that the execution may sometimes be implemented without a legal process; both Turkish victims were converts from Islam to following Jesus.[1] Perhaps their German friend just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.[2]

This event made a particular truth painfully vivid to me, even though I had long understood it. Some religions, philosophies, and ideologies lead to the abuse of human rights when they are consistently implemented, whereas other religions, philosophies, and ideologies motivate people to protect human rights. Words are powerful; they shape and direct the actions of individuals, groups, and whole communities. One set of words will lead to peace, freedom, justice, and human flourishing; another set of words leads to persecution, abuse, death, and destruction. And the really important words are usually part of someone's religion, philosophy, or political ideology. Some belief systems and worldviews either claim that there is no real human dignity or that dignity is only earned by certain individuals or groups; these religions, belief systems, and worldviews can easily lead to assaults on human rights. Other belief systems and worldviews believe that dignity is given to all human beings, men, women, and children; such religions, belief systems, and ideologies tend to promote cultures, laws, and political systems that protect human rights. A serious discussion of human rights must consider the ideas which either promote or attack human rights. Too many

books and articles about human rights talk as if the problems are only political or legal, neglecting the role of religions, philosophies, and ideologies in relation to human rights.

It is beyond the scope of this little book to survey all the religions, philosophies, and political ideologies of the world with regard to how they think about human dignity and human rights. What is possible is to identify selected ideas or beliefs that threaten human rights or undermine the protection of human rights, to identify some of the cultural locations where these destructive ideas occur, and to briefly state why one should reject these ideas. The critique of such destructive ideas can reduce their influence in the lives of individuals and cultures.

1 A Person Has Rights If He or She Belongs to My Race or Nation

Because of sinful human pride, many of us would like to think that "my people," whoever they are, are somehow superior to normal mortals. Most of us quickly notice the problem when someone else regards us as inferior or subhuman because he/she belongs to a superior race, but we might not always notice our tendency to regard others as less than human. This problem is possible because God created us as members of particular ethnic groups and nationalities, and there is nothing seriously wrong with a modest ethnic pride, so long as we can want our neighbors of different ethnic or national groups to have a similar love of their extended family and community. I really like being a Bentheimer[3], and there is nothing wrong with those feelings as long as I truly hope that my Turkish, Czech, Russian, Vietnamese, and Roma neighbors really like belonging to their people group in the same way. The serious problems start when anyone begins to imagine that his or her ethnic group or nation is significantly superior or that some other group is really inferior.[4] On some occasions, whole groups of people have talked and acted as if their race had God-like characteristics, turning their people group into an idol; for example, the Nazi glorification of "blood and race" sometimes sounded like idol worship, with their own people as the object of worship. If this line of thought is not restrained by something higher, it can lead people to think that other people groups are less than fully human. And if they are less than fully human, they do not have to be treated like fellow human beings; they do not have rights that must be protected.[5] This line of thinking has recurred repeatedly as a part of the background for ethnic cleansing and genocide.

To this point, the discussion may sound somewhat theoretical, but it is a central part of the cognitive background for some of the worst atrocities in our time. There is a clear pattern to the ideas which have motivated people in many bloody attempts at genocide and ethnic cleansing, in Burma, in

Rwanda, in Darfur and Chad, and in the Nazi attempt to exterminate "sub-humans." Victims of genocide are routinely described as being less than fully human and therefore not in possession of the normal rights of humans; perpetrators of genocide routinely regard themselves as the true humans or as superior human beings and therefore the owners of significant rights which other people groups do not have.[6]

There may have been a time when it made sense to think that most nation-states would be comprised of people from one people group. After all, many nations had their own language, literature, customs, and history which gave them their distinctive identity. In that historical situation there was a strong connection between a nation and the ethnic group that led the nation. But in a global society, that is almost never true. There are now individuals from almost every language and people living in almost every nation. This makes it more important than ever to recognize that people have rights because they are human, regardless of the ethnic group to which they belong.

We can hope that most people, and especially most government authorities, will be able to recognize the common humanity of all people; this important moral truth has been recognized and proclaimed by most of the important human rights documents of our time. This moral truth should be reinforced by means of Christian believers from around the world regularly and repeatedly saying that all human beings have a special dignity because they are created in the image of God. People have rights because they are human, not because of their ethnic or national identity.

2 A Person Has Rights Because He or She Belongs to My Religion

There have been times in the history of the Christian church when some Christians did not fully recognize the political rights of people from other religions or without a well-defined religion. We must acknowledge this sin of some of our ancestors and turn away from it. This sinful idea contributed to anti-Semitism among Christians, which has recurred too often. Sinful ideas of this sort (though not using exactly this terminology) contributed to the Crusades in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries, one of the truly black times in Christian history. This problem tends to arise whenever a government becomes too closely connected with a particular religious tradition. Then that government tends to forget, neglect, or deny the rights of people who do not belong to the religious tradition most closely associated with the state. We must repeatedly and clearly say that people have rights because they are human, created in the image of God, not because they belong to my religion or our church. Within Christian circles we must say that rights come from creation, not from redemption; people have rights because they are created in

the image of God, not because they believe in Jesus.

One of the examples of problems in this sphere is the relationship of Islam to the state in several countries that identify themselves as officially Muslim. In those situations, one frequently encounters the claim that a state is legitimate to the extent to which it promotes Islam. Instead of thinking of multiple religions within a state, some think of multiple states within a religion, with each state deriving its authority from that religion. It is no surprise that Jews and Christians have sometimes been assigned an official second-class status within Muslim countries, so that they have not enjoyed the privileges enjoyed by Muslims.[7] But even Jews and Christians have often been somewhat more protected than polytheists, followers of Baha'i, or people without a defined religious tradition, who have often been severely persecuted within Muslim countries. We can hope that most Muslims want to reject this pattern in the future, in the same way that Christians reject the idea of future Crusades. It has been difficult for Muslims to successfully break with this past because classical Muslim theology has not always had a well-developed doctrine of all humans being equally created in the image of God, though the idea of humans being in the image of God occurs occasionally in ancient Muslim texts. And recent political Islam has reasserted the claim that a Muslim state receives its legitimacy by means of promoting Islam; this means a state does not receive its moral legitimacy from protecting the rights of all people. This theological situation leaves some Muslims with an inclination to think that people have rights because they are Muslims, not because they are human. Even the more recent Muslim public human rights statements may not fully overcome this problem, because the problem has been partly rooted in traditional Muslim ways of thinking. We Christians should invite our Muslim neighbors to debate these questions with us and with each other.

A somewhat similar problem can be observed in Russian Orthodox history. The Russian Orthodox Church has a history of a close relationship with the Russian state which is articulated in their theory of church/state relations.[8] This has been made worse by the way in which the Orthodox Church has sometimes become the primary institution charged with carrying and promoting Russian culture. The close relationship with the state has made it difficult for the Russian Orthodox Church to confront the Russian state when it has not protected the rights of people. At the same time, the way in which the Russian Orthodox Church has been seen as the proper carrier of the culture has left many of her own members wondering if a person who is not a member of the Russian Orthodox Church can be a good Russian. The repeated persecution of other religious groups, sometimes including evangelicals, is not surprising. Evangelical Christians need to regularly and repeatedly call on our

Russian Orthodox friends to remember that all humans are created by God in the image of God; this gives people a distinctive dignity as humans whether or not they are members of the Russian Orthodox Church; for this reason, all humans have rights which must be protected. The Orthodox Church does not need to say or do things that lead to the persecution of other religious groups in order to continue to shape Russian culture. And in an open, global society, the Orthodox Church will need to emphasize its independence from the Russian state in order to be able to articulate a proper prophetic criticism of Russian culture and society that can bring the spiritual renewal of society which our Orthodox friends desire.

3 Protecting Human Rights Leads to Radical Individualism

It is not unusual to hear the claim that if a nation starts protecting human rights, it will almost necessarily lead to the radical, extreme individualism that is so seriously impoverishing western society, especially Europe and North America. Some claim that other cultures, especially Asian or African cultures, have other ways of talking about political morality.

It must be granted that the most important matter is protecting real human beings, not a particular set of terms one might like to use to describe our duty to protect human life; if Asian and African cultures have other varieties of moral language to describe our duties to protect particular people, they should use that moral terminology while carefully avoiding the tendency in all our cultural traditions to use moral language to cover up our inhumane treatment of each other. But it would be a serious mistake to accept the claim that any concern for human rights automatically commits a person to radical individualism.

I would argue that a proper concern for human rights is best maintained by an approach to life in society that avoids the extremes of individualism and collectivism. Instead of either individualism or collectivism, we should rather think that God has created multiple institutions and organisms in society, each of which has the responsibility and authority to protect, nurture, and develop human well-being in different ways. Some of these God-given institutions and organisms include family, clan, school, business, profession, medicine, church, and the different levels of government.

Some societies are more collectivist, which means they tend to think of the group, the society, the country, or the culture as being truly real and important; within the collectivist situation, the individual is important only to the extent to which he or she contributes to the larger group. The largest weakness of collectivist societies and political ideologies is that individual needs, desires, and rights are often neglected or denied. In contrast, individualist

societies and ideologies say that only the individual person is real and important; the individualist may say the society or country is valuable or real only if it enables or supports the desires of individuals. The largest weakness of individualist societies and ideologies is that the individual person is worshipped as an idol, neglecting the way God gives us duties in a wide variety of relationships. Both collectivism and individualism are attempts to find safety; collectivists are usually looking for safety from the threats of nature, whereas individualists are usually looking for safety from the threats which come from the dangerous, overly powerful state. Some societies fluctuate between the two poles of collectivism and individualism.

As followers of Jesus, we should not be either collectivists or individualists. God has given us many different communities to which we can belong: family, marriage, church, neighborhood, business, school, professional organizations, cities, and nations. We can call some of these organisms and organizations "creation orders" or "creation mandates." Our task is to serve each other, really to love each other, in different ways in each of the different communities; indeed human life flourishes when all of these different communities are fulfilling their unique God-given tasks. A central task or duty of government is to promote justice by means of protecting the rights of people. If people are serving each other in the whole range of other communities, protecting human rights does not lead to extreme individualism. Protection of human rights provides a framework of justice in society which should allow all the many other communities to pursue the duties God has assigned to each.[9]

4 Rights Are Given to People by the Government, State, or Society

Various totalitarian and authoritarian political regimes have talked as if rights are given to people by the state, by a political party, or by the society. And it is common for such authoritarian or totalitarian regimes to be dominated by a political ideology which includes some implicit (or occasionally explicit) definition about what types of people are qualified to receive rights from the state. Within eastern European communism, economically productive members of the proletariat were supposed to be considered worthy of receiving rights from the state. Within Hitler's National Socialism, people who were carriers of true "Aryan" blood were supposed to be worthy of receiving rights, though they may not have used exactly these words to describe their point of view. Other ideologies have had other definitions about how people can earn rights from the state.

Followers of Jesus should respond to this line of thinking with several very serious criticisms. The first of these is that rights come from God, not from the state, not from the society, and not from a political party. Whenever a gov-

ernment, state, or political party claims to give rights to people, we should recognize very serious idolatry; some political entity has dared to take the place of God himself and in this process, the state can easily become a devouring beast. We must say at every possible occasion that rights are gifts of God, the Creator. People have rights because they are created by God in his image. But we must also recognize that many of our neighbors are not yet believers in the God of the Bible, and therefore it will be extremely difficult for them to say that rights are given by God, the Creator. This places these people in the difficult position of not knowing what to say about the origin or source of human rights. In the European Union statements about human rights, one occasionally hears the suggestion that the EU is the source or origin of human rights, even though most of the writers probably did not really have this intention; they simply did not know what else to say about the origin of human rights. The authors of the EU statements on human rights probably intended to say that the EU has the important task of protecting human rights; by accident, they sometimes sound like the EU might also give rights, only because they did not know what to say about the origin of rights. This problem has prompted people to sometimes talk about "natural rights" or to say that rights come "from nature." Many people in the past who talked about "natural rights" truly believed in God and believed that rights are gifts from God; they also knew that many of their neighbors did not believe in God; they also thought it might not be wise for the description of human rights (which the government must protect) to be too closely tied to any particular church or religion.[10] Their solution was to describe human rights as "natural" in the sense of being given by nature; sometimes they would add "and nature's God." I like it when there are public recognitions that rights come from God, but we must also recognize that the description of human rights as gifts of nature at least eliminates the horrible idolatry of saying that rights are given by the state or the government. The idolatry of the state has been a crucial part of some of the ideologies that have supported genocide; elimination of this idolatry will tend to reduce the number of genocides in the future. Without an ideology that worships the state, a class, or the party, atrocities like those under Hitler and Stalin are very hard to imagine. If a society can begin to describe human rights as gifts of nature, this should be recognized as an important step toward the practice of justice, which followers of Jesus must support.[11] This way of talking will reduce the idolatry of the state and the resulting abuses of people.

A second important criticism of the idea that rights are given by the state arises from the observation that what the state gives, the state can also take back again. If people get into the habit of thinking and saying that the state gives rights such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of

assembly, then we open an important door in our minds to think or say that the state might take back what it previously gave. A major crisis or a change of regime could easily lead those in power (or a majority of the populace) to think the state may take back many important liberties that should be seen as essential parts of human dignity. Words and ideas that become accepted parts of political and legal culture have massive long-term power, for good or for evil. It should be a part of the political mission of the followers of Jesus that we attempt to convince our neighbors to talk as if rights come from nature and nature's God, not from the state. This will reduce the frequency of states taking back the rights they falsely claim to have given to their people; and this will reduce the number of abuses of those rights.

A third important criticism of the idea that a state can give rights arises from seeing the way in which states tend to think they may give rights to some people and withhold rights from other people. Christians should be familiar with the time the apostle Paul claimed his rights as a Roman citizen (see Acts 22:22–29). By Roman laws of the time, many people could be flogged, whipped, or otherwise tortured in order to gain a confession of guilt regarding a crime; Roman citizens had a legal right not to be tortured and not to be punished without a trial. Paul claimed his rights as a citizen, and the soldiers were horrified that they nearly committed the serious crime of torturing a citizen. Torturing non-citizens was business as usual, since the ideology of the Roman Empire regarded rights as something that could be given by the empire to selected people, particularly its own citizens, who were very few in number. This same problem has occurred repeatedly around the world. When people think the government is the source or giver of rights, they will tend to withhold those rights from anyone who is seen as less desirable, and those less desirable people may be tortured, punished, or killed without serious questions. Christians and all people of good will must shout with one voice that people have rights because they are human, not because of any particular citizenship or any legal situation, class level, or political status. The state does not give rights, and it may not decide who has rights. The state must observe and protect human rights, even of the people it regards as its enemies.

5 People Are Given Rights by International Law, Treaties, and Human Rights Conventions

Over the last several decades, starting mostly after World War II, we have seen a developing body of international laws, treaties, and human rights conventions, some of which have been implemented and followed by various national or international courts. Most of this has been very good; some people are being called to account for genocide, war

crimes, and some other crimes against humanity. Otherwise these criminals would not have faced justice in this life. Many judges and lawyers have made great personal sacrifices to establish these systems of international justice. Their efforts are reducing the number of times that terrible atrocities go unpunished because the criminals had manipulated local laws or legal systems prior to committing their worst crimes.

At the same time, this very constructive development may ironically share in the very problem it is intended to overcome: the idea that an action is acceptable if there is not a specific law forbidding the action. A good example of the problem is the profoundly disturbing dilemma faced by the judges at both the European and Asian war crimes trials after World War II. Many of the atrocities committed by Japanese and Nazi leaders during the war, as well as during the general social chaos surrounding the war, were not illegal under the laws of their countries. Some national laws were changed or abolished prior to the crimes, so the horrible actions were not illegal. Should the judges have declared these people "not guilty" because they had not broken any written laws, even though the judges knew without doubt that many of the accused had caused the deaths of millions, in addition to causing unspeakable suffering? Can an action be illegal, even if there is no law specifically forbidding the action? Some of the judges concluded that there must be a law above the law, a universal moral law above the written civil law, and that this unwritten law is clear enough to provide a basis for a trial at law in extraordinary circumstances.[12]

The good efforts since that time have reduced the problem by means of putting into place a network of international laws, tribunals, and human rights treaties that should clearly document what a crime against humanity is. The size of the intellectual dilemma faced by the World War II war crimes tribunals has been minimized; in our time the justices serving in trials of criminals against humanity have much more support and guidance by means of written laws and treaties. But the basic problem has not disappeared.

Some people describe this problem as "Legal Positivism." Legal Positivism is any theory that says either that there is no law above the law or that we cannot know if there is a law above the law. It is not surprising that the horrible totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century advocated positivist legal theories, claiming there is no higher law by which the actions of their party or state could be evaluated. What is deeply disturbing is the extent to which some of the legal theories in democracies are also positivistic.[13]

Within a democratic context, the idea is often encountered that a law or policy is just and proper if it came into existence by means of a proper democratic process, whether by means of a popular vote or coming from a congress or parliament. Such theories ignore the possibility that some actions, laws, or policies may be unjust by nature, meaning that

the actions, law, or policies can never be practiced in a just manner. Such theories ignore the possibility that justice is something real, prior to a particular law we vote into existence. It is possible, for example, that a democracy will adopt and enforce laws that are cruel and unjust in their treatment of minorities or in their treatment of people who are not citizens. A positivist theory of law and human rights makes it very difficult for anyone to say a law or policy is fundamentally wrong. And some actions are unjust, even if they are allowed by democratically adopted laws.

We must avoid ever talking about human rights in a merely positivistic manner. I have repeatedly heard this problem among my university students. Without deeply considering the question, they have talked as if people have those rights, and only those rights, which have been assigned or recognized by international law or international human rights treaties. This is an exact reversal of how we should talk. People have rights because of a God-given dignity, which is part of the image of God in humans. International law and human rights treaties should serve to protect and honor these rights, not give those rights. If we say that rights are given by international law or by treaties, someone else will want to change those laws or treaties (or important definitions of terms) and take those rights away again. This problem is very similar to the problem of saying that rights are given by a government or by society. Such a positivistic interpretation of human rights laws and declarations will undermine the effectiveness of the people who invested so much time, effort, and love in their creation.

To reduce this problem, we should clearly distinguish between civil rights and natural (God-given) human rights. People have civil rights because of membership or participation in particular societies; people have natural human rights because they are human. I happen to be a citizen of one country but a long-term resident of another country; this means I have slightly different civil rights in the two countries. I can vote in one country, where I am a citizen; I might receive social security benefits in a country in which I am not a citizen. My civil rights are determined by the laws of the two countries in which I have a legal status (as well as by a vast range of international agreements). But I also have certain moral rights that belong to me because I am a human being, without regard to citizenship or residency in any country. As a human being, I have rights to life, to speak my mind, to worship, to own property, to freedom from torture, to freedom of travel, etc. These fundamental human rights are real and important, whether or not they are recognized by international law, treaties, or human rights declarations. The valuable international measures are properly intended to confirm, clarify, and protect human rights; they do not create or give those rights.

6 Human Rights Come from the Self

This point of view is not usually stated in exactly these words; therefore, even students of philosophy sometimes miss the central claims. Points of view like this are often encountered in individualistic, secular, western liberalism, which has been very influential in North American universities and in the media. Michael Tooley is a representative philosopher of this perspective; he was largely following the theories of Joel Feinberg, who claimed that the type of entity or being that can have rights is the type of entity or being that can have interests. Tooley argues, "The interest principle tells us that an entity cannot have any rights at all, and *a fortiori*, cannot have a right to life, unless it is capable of having interests." From this basis he continues his argument by claiming that in order to have interests, one must have consciousness and an awareness of the self as a subject of continuing consciousness. I cried the first time I read the conclusion to this argument. "It is seen to be most unlikely that human fetuses, or even newborn babies, possess any concept of a continuing self. ... This means that such individuals do not possess a right to life." He continues, " ... it becomes very much an open question whether animals belonging to other species do not possess properties that give them a right to life. Indeed, I am strongly inclined to think that adult members of at least some nonhuman species do have a right to life."[14]

The background for Tooley's worldview is naturalistic (meaning atheistic) evolution which regards life as a result of chance. If life is a result of chance, then human life is also a result of chance. This leaves no clear and clean distinction between human life and nonhuman life, so that humanity is not seen as qualitatively different from that which is not human. From this starting point, he writes about rights. The basic framework of his theory of ethics is that consciousness leads to interests; interests lead to moral rights; moral rights should be systematically recognized and protected by law in a rational manner.

We should be deeply disturbed by Tooley's defense of abortion and the killing of babies; very arbitrarily he thinks developed societies should not allow infanticide on children over an age of about a week. Prior to that time they are disposable. He really claims that some animals have more rights than human babies. This perspective arises from his broader picture of the source of any type of moral rights which should also be recognized by law. Rights come to the self *from the self.* Though the ideas are not usually so clearly articulated, something similar is common in western individualism. Many assume, perhaps vaguely, that rights are given to the self by the self, which some animals can also do.

Theories of this type, especially when not clearly articulated, have two negative influences on human rights protection. Someone will write a human rights statement that sounds like a small

child writing a list of all the gifts he or she wants for Christmas; anything and everything that might serve someone's self-interest becomes a "right" which people should have. In this way, the serious discussion of human rights is reduced to nonsense which no one should take seriously; this is one of the reasons why some morally sensitive people want to drop any discussion of human rights. If we say rights come from nature, at least we can have a sober discussion of what rights people may have. Additionally, Tooley's type of argument both reflects and promotes the loss of any morally significant difference between humans and non-human animals. We should not be cruel to animals, but the protection of human rights will be dependent on keeping a clear distinction in our minds between the value of humans and that of animals.

7 We Earn Rights by Means of Abilities and Functions

Another important claim we encounter in individualistic secular liberalism is that human rights are closely tied to normal human abilities and functions. The widely read animal rights philosopher Peter Singer has argued that a right to life is properly based on such normal human abilities as self-awareness, being able to plan for the future, and being able to carry on meaningful relationships. These abilities, he claims, are what give normal humans rights which mice do not have. However, he claims, a well-developed dog, pig, or chimpanzee may possess these abilities to a larger degree than does a severely retarded child or an adult with severe senility. Therefore, he thinks some animals have rights that some humans do not have.[15]

I often thought about Singer's theories during the several years when my mother-in-law was disabled with Alzheimer's disease. My wife's mother, once a very intelligent and active woman, lost most of the normal abilities and functions which, Singer claimed, give us human rights. She could not plan for the future or carry on meaningful relationships; I do not know about the level of her self-awareness during her final years. According to Singer, our family dog had more rights than she did; and if I did not agree with Singer, he claimed I would be guilty of the serious sin of "speciesism." He carefully chose his moral language so this sin would sound like racism and sexism, the unjust treatment of a person because of the person's race or gender.

Theories of human value like that of Singer can be called "functionalist" in the sense that human dignity is based on normal human functions and abilities. And most functionalist theories of human dignity, whether argued by western secular philosophers or by communist theorists, lead to the conclusion that people who do not have those functions do not have any rights. Those people may be discarded, whether via

active euthanasia, infanticide, or a concentration camp.

In stark contrast, I understand the biblical claim to be that human dignity comes to us as a gift from God. For that reason, I would prefer to call it an "alien dignity," meaning a dignity that comes to us from outside ourselves as a gift. This terminology is derived from the way evangelicals have often called our righteousness in Christ an "alien righteousness," meaning a righteousness that comes to us as a gift from God while we are still sinners.[16] It is not a righteousness that comes from within us; our righteousness in Christ comes as a free gift from God. In a similar manner, our dignity as humans is not really something inherent or intrinsic. It is extrinsic or exherent, coming to us from outside, from God, because he has called us to be in his image. Human dignity exists because that is how God has decided to view us. A dignity of this type cannot be lost because Alzheimer's disease or any other disability destroys our normal human functions. And therefore we should say that people have rights that are not based on normal functions and abilities. Human dignity is a free gift of God to all men, women, and children.

Comments

Human rights abuses are often called "crimes against humanity." The value of this way of talking is that it calls these actions crimes and thereby makes it clear that people can and should be held accountable before a judge in a court of law for their actions. This is a very large advantage. The disadvantage of this way of talking is that it can accidentally hide the way in which human rights abuses are often significantly different from other crimes. Human rights abuses are often closely tied to a political ideology, a dysfunctional religion, or a set of philosophical convictions which are used to justify criminal behavior. The enforcement of international laws against human rights abuses must be accompanied by the critique of the ideas that lead to such human rights abuses and a bold proclamation that God created people with special dignity in his image.

Some evangelical Christians will be called by God to become specialists in human rights law, human rights journalism, or other forms of specialized activism. I have been inspired by the example of William Wilberforce, who spent much of his life tirelessly fighting for laws against slave trading in the British Parliament. In addition to these specialists, many evangelical Christians can also become critics of the ideas which support human rights abuses. God calls us to speak out against sin on the basis of his Word. This is part of Christian proclamation which should be central to many of our meetings as Christians. The condemnation of sin must also include a condemnation of the ideas that support such sinful behavior, whether the sins are committed by individuals, political parties, or

governments. We should publicly criticize the ideas and beliefs that support human rights abuses in our sermons, Bible classes, youth groups, schools, colleges, and seminaries. There are, today, hundreds of millions of evangelical Christians scattered around the globe. We must have millions of churches, Bible study groups, prayer groups, and Sunday School classes. If we start criticizing the ideas and beliefs that lead to human rights abuses, we can slowly have a global impact that parallels the efforts of human rights declarations and courts. This is, I think, part of what it means to love our neighbors in a global society.

We must always be careful not to let a Christian church or an evangelical mission become a political party. But we should publicly criticize the ideas and beliefs that attack the only proper image of God within creation, human beings, expecting that this criticism will have an influence in the public square. The Bible gives us the most exalted view of human nature available today, when many people do not know what to say about what a human being is or why human life has any dignity. We should publicly proclaim what the Bible says about the value of human life, expecting this proclamation to have an influence in the public square. We should let the world know that we think that humans have a God-given dignity; we can do this by talking about it frequently. This may help people of good will come to faith, push various political leaders and their parties in a positive direction on these questions, cause changes in political ideologies, and even influence our neighbors who follow some other religion. The voices of hundreds of millions of evangelical Christians can influence public opinion around the world. To help protect human rights, we should tell the world that human life has a special God-given value.

Annotation
Anmerkungen

[1] Some newer interpretations of the Sharia, more prominent since the 1800s, would not demand execution in these circumstances, but older interpretations of the Sharia are still influential among some people, especially in political Islam, which often follows Wahhabi theology.

[2] These murders occurred on April 17, 2007. As my personal protest against this crime, I have chosen to write these words while sitting in Turkey.

[3] The little province of Bentheim was, for much of its history, on the border between Germany and the Netherlands.

[4] If I start telling you that we Bentheimers are a superior race, far above all the inferior peoples in the world, you will probably just laugh because you have probably never heard enough about us Bentheimers to take us seriously. If a person starts to claim massive superiority because he is American, Chinese, Russian, or German, you would start to recognize a moral/political problem. This is inappropriate nationalism.

[5] My wife and I have encountered the claim that it is wrong for Americans to practice prejudice against blacks, because blacks are not inherently inferior to whites; but it is proper for Europeans to practice prejudice against the Roma (also called Gypsies), because the Roma are inherently inferior to Europeans. Therefore, some claim, the Roma do not have the normal rights of humans. This line of thinking and acting should arouse our anger.

[6] Throughout human history, at least until the mid 1800s, there have been numerous theories that said there is no single human race. Many of these "polygenetic" theories (or myths) claimed that there are such fundamental physical and psychological differences between the various entities sometimes called "human" that the different human "races" should be seen as entirely different creatures with different origins. Some claimed there were only four human-like races, whereas others thought there were as many as twenty-two races. Such theories were used to defend slavery of blacks in both the US and the UK in the 1800s; similar theories were used to defend the caste system in India. The ancient Greeks generally saw their "barbarian" neighbors as not human, though the Stoic philosophers disagreed with the other Greeks on this question. The fact that people from every background can have children together should be sufficient proof of the fundamental unity of the human race, which supports the idea that all people have the same natural rights. The unity of medical science and treatment is only possible because of a fundamental unity of the human race.

[7] This second-class legal status is usually called *dhimmitude*. It means something like restricted and protected, but the protection has usually been from extermination, not a general protection of all rights. See Bat Ye'or, *Islam and Dimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide,* translated from French by Miriam Kochman and David Littman (Associated University Presses, 2002).

[8] "Caesaropapism" is the term often used to describe a situation in which a "Caesar" or any top government ruler is accepted by the church into a "papal" or pope-like role. This tends to reduce the church to acting like a department of the government. Many orthodox theologians insist that Caesaropapism, though often practiced by the Russian Orthodox Church, represents a distortion of proper Orthodox ethics.

[9] Protestant ethics often uses the terminology of "sphere sovereignty" to describe the way in which each God-given community is directly and primarily accountable to God for fulfilling its tasks, so that each human institution or organism should also have a degree of independence in relation to other human institutions. Our Roman Catholic friends often use the terminology of "subsidiarity" to describe a similar idea, though the ideas are not 100% identical.

[10] I am thinking here especially of the descriptions of rights in philosophers such as Hugo Grotius, John Locke, and Thomas Jefferson during the time of the Enlightenment or John Finnis and Robert George in recent years.

[11] Many of the writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who talked about "natural rights" were Deists, if they were not Christians. As Deists they believed in a Designer who created the world but did not continue to be active in the world in the works of providence, redemption, and revelation. Today the description of human rights as gifts of nature raises the danger of encouraging "Mother Nature" or "Mother Earth" worship, which is usually more pantheistic, without clear distinctions between a creator, nature, and human beings. "Mother Nature" worship can sometimes confuse the distinction of humans from non-humans, so that people do not have a clear explanation of why humans have rights which are not shared by insects or oysters. We must never grow tired of repeating that humans are distinct because we are created in the image of God.

[12] A concise analysis of this question appears in *Ethics: Theory and Practice,* edited by Manual Velasquez and Cynthia Rostankowski (Prentice Hall, 1985), pp. 31–34.

[13] See Phillip E. Johnson, "The Modernist Impasse in Law," in *God & Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F. H. Henry,* edited by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp. 180–194; David Noble, *Understanding the Times* (Summit Press, 1991), pp. 499–593; and Emil Brunner, *Christianity and Civilisation, Part II* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1949), pp. 101–113.

[14] Michael Tooley, "In Defense of Abortion and Infanticide," in *Applying Ethics: A Text with Readings,* fourth edition, edited by Jeffrey Olen and Vincent Barry (Wadsworth, 1992), pp. 176–185. Quotations from pages 178, 183, and 185.

[15] See Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation* (New York, 1975).

[16] This way of talking about an "alien" righteousness in Christ was used already by Martin Luther in the early sixteenth century; he may have learned it from someone earlier. The term "alien dignity" was probably coined by the German Protestant ethicist Helmut Thielicke in the mid-twentieth century to show the difference between biblically informed theories of human dignity and those theories which are influenced by unbelief.

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Über den Autor

Thomas K. Johnson received his Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa (1987) after being a research scholar at Eberhard Karls Universität (Tübingen). He has an ACPE from Missouri Baptist Hospital (St. Louis, 1981), a Master of Divinity (*Magna Cum Laude*) from Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, 1981), and a BA (*Cum Laude*) from Hope College (Michigan, 1977). He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America and planted Hope Evangelical Church (PCA) in Iowa. Johnson was adjunct professor of philosophy at Kirkwood College 1991–1994; visiting professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, 1994–1996. (UHU is a dissident, anti-Communist university, forced into exile by the Belarusian dictator in 2004.) Since 1996 he and his wife have lived in Prague, Czech Republic, where he taught philosophy at Anglo-American University (4 years) and at Charles University (8 ½ years). He is MBS Professor of Apologetics and Ethics (2003) and Vice President for Research (2007). His wife, Leslie P. Johnson, is director of the Christian International School of Prague.

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