

Human Rights and Responsibilities:  
Christian Perspectives

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Christian traditions have influenced and continue to influence the discourse and practice of human rights in both secular and religious contexts.

While most contemporary Christians recognize the veracity and importance of human rights, different traditions understand human rights and the necessity of balancing human rights with human responsibilities in various ways. Understanding those diverse viewpoints and their moral sources can further an assessment of Christian influences on human rights discourse and practice. Comparison of Christian theologies of human rights with views of human rights held by other religions highlights similarities and differences and fosters dialogue about human rights from religious perspectives.

## **Theological Concepts for Human Rights**

Christian perspectives on human rights revolve around four theological concepts that are reflected in Christian traditions.

1. **Image of God.** A belief in the dignity and worth of persons as a source for the idea of human rights springs from a Judeo-Christian understanding that persons are created in God's image. The creation narratives in the Bible tell of an all-powerful yet good God who creates humans in God's own image. (Genesis 1 and 2) Consequently, God's image defines humanity. That image is reflected in human intellect and abilities, language and sociality, morality and a yearning to be in communication with God. (Ps. 139) This theology asserts that because God created humans in God's image, human dignity and worth are axiomatic, non-negotiable, and bestowed on all people. (John 1, Hebrews 1)

Because persons are created in God's image, Christians through the ages have assigned a transcendent worth to human beings. Augustine (354-430) taught that God's image in humanity is reflected in the

power of reason and understanding that sets humans over all irrational creatures.<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther insisted that forgiveness of sins and righteousness are imputed to all who have faith in Christ.<sup>2</sup> For many contemporary Christians, the value given by God to humans implies that no person is reducible to a societal role, no person is exactly like any other, and each individual is of incalculable worth by virtue of being human.

From this view twin tenants of human rights can be drawn: the freedom to choose and the freedom from harm. An emphasis on justice for individuals, equality, care for the poor, protection of life, and freedom of religion are human rights emphases that spring from this view. Image of God arguments can emphasize the inviolability of humans and the centrality of the individual. Civil and political rights can be derived from this theological point of view, especially religious liberty. Alternatively, image of God

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, E.B. Pusey, D.D. trans., First published 397 c.e. NY: E.P.Dutton & Do. Inc., 1907, Reprinted, 1949, p. 345.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther, "Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians" in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, John Dillenberger, ed., Doubleday, Anchor Books, 1961, p. 111.

arguments can stress the relational nature of persons as created in the Trinitarian image of God. With this emphasis, communal rights and the well being of the entire human family come to the fore.

For example, the Roman Catholic Church, in using this moral source, stresses the right to "everything necessary for leading a life truly human, such as food, clothing and shelter; the rights to choose a state of life freely and to found a family, the right to education, to employment, to a good reputation, to appropriate information, to activity in accord with the upright norm of one's own conscience, to protection of privacy and to rightful freedom in matters religious too."<sup>3</sup>

As early as 1891, Pope Leo XIII in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* stressed the necessity of caring first for the poor and needy and preserving the economic rights of the labor class.<sup>4</sup> Religious liberty has been another strong theme in Catholic teaching, particularly

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<sup>3</sup> "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern World," in *Documents of Vatican II*, Walter M. Abbott, S.J., General Editor, Herder and Herder Association Press, 1966, op cit., p. 680f. (See also pps. 210-211).

<sup>4</sup> "Rerum Novarum," AAS 23 (1890-91) p. 651. Cited in *The*

during the early twentieth century when Catholics were immigrating to the U.S.A. in great numbers. In 1965 Vatican II put out *Dignitatis Humanae* which stressed the right to search for truth in religious matters and worship according to one's conscience.<sup>5</sup>

Christian feminists provide another example of a human rights stance that grows out of a Christian theology of the image of God. Gender equality, both of status and opportunity, is a central tenant of Christian feminism. Catholic theologians Rosemary Radford Reuther, Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza and Protestant Beverly Harrison are representative of feminists that stress gender equality and the necessity of working towards equal rights for women.<sup>6</sup>

The image of God as a theological construct also informs Protestant Christian feminists in Indonesia who

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*Documents of Vatican II*, op cit., p. 278, note 222.

<sup>5</sup> "Declaration on Religious Freedom," *The Documents of Vatican II*, p.225.

<sup>6</sup> Rosemary Radford Reuther, "The Liberation of Christology from Patriarchy" in *Feminist Theology: A Reader*, Ann Loades, ed. (Westminster/John Knox, 1990) p. 139; Elizabeth Schussler Fiorenza, "For Women in Men's World: A Critical Feminist Theology of Liberation," in *The Power of Naming: A Concilium Reader in Feminist Liberation Theology* (Orbis, 1996) p. 5; Beverly Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, Carol Robb, ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985, Ch.1.

work for the rights of women to choice and leadership in the church. Using the story of creation in Genesis 1, in which God creates man and woman and sets them in the garden as stewards of the earth, Indonesian women support, yet go beyond, a gender partnership model of church leadership. While Indonesian women have worked toward gender equality in the church with a partnership model, some leaders question customs that appear to affirm women in partnership with men but do not result in women leaders. These women use a religion-identified resistance to move beyond partnership models to gender equality.<sup>7</sup> The rights of Christian women to pursue leadership in the church is balanced, in this view, by their responsibility to be good stewards of their own talents and of church resources.<sup>8</sup>

2. **Order of Creation.** A related theological position used to support human rights is the idea that

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<sup>7</sup> Frances S. Adeney, *Christian Women in Indonesia: A Narrative Study of Gender and Religion*, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003, pps. 96-97.

<sup>8</sup> Magdalena H. Tangkudung. *Mitos dan Kodrat: Suatu Kajian Mengenai Kedudukan dan Peranan Wanita Kristen di Minahasa*. Master's Thesis, Graduate Program in Religion and Society, Satya Wacana Christian University, Salatiga, Indonesia, 1994, p. 2.

the Sovereign God created and ordered domains and spheres of influence in the world. God is God of all and creation, as God's work, is good.(Gen. 1) God's sovereignty and will governs the world. Yet God established orders of authority and care and delegates authority and spheres of responsibility to human institutions and individuals. (Gen. 1)

The task of humans is to love and glorify God.<sup>9</sup> In this view, God's will is obeyed when authority is properly delegated and utilized. Caring for those under one's charge is a way of glorifying God. Seeking one's own rights is not a priority in this view. Rather, properly fulfilling one's duty, which includes protecting the rights of others, is stressed.

Since God created all, God is source of the rights of all. Human institutions, including governments, should properly order and fulfill their authority by respecting human rights, which are based on the higher authority of God. Government's protective role is given by God and is therefore subject to God's sovereign

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<sup>9</sup> Westminster Larger Catechism, *Book of Confessions* (Office of the General Assembly, PC(USA): 1996), p.201.

rule.<sup>10</sup>

Understanding human institutions as ordained by God leads to a stress on fairness and a separation of spheres of authority and rights belonging to each. (Ro.12) Political and social institutions thereby become God's agents in the world, ideally agents for justice. Order of creation arguments can emphasize the importance of humans as the crown of creation, leading to an individual rights emphasis or they can stress the inter-relatedness of all creation and thus emphasize care for the environment and orders of creation in their own right.

This theology does not separate public life from the private sphere or from religious convictions. A balance of duties is sometimes stressed so that each person and institution can glorify God by operating unhindered in their sphere of authority, thus fulfilling God's will.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin's Institutes*, Mac Dill, AFB, Florida: MacDonald Publishing Co., Book 4, Chapter 20, "Civil Government," Section 4, p. 787.

<sup>11</sup> See Calvin on the authority of Christian princes and magistrates in *Calvin's Institutes*, Book 4, Chapter 20, Section 9, op cit. p. 790.

The Protestant Reformed tradition follows John Calvin in developing and applying this theology to the governance of the world and to the care of the earth. The PC(USA) builds these concerns into their denominational structure and activities.<sup>12</sup> The proportional rights of others, including future generations, and the care and protection of nature are important considerations that grow out of the order of creation understanding. Social and economic rights and ecological justice for animals and creation can each find a place in the order of creation theology as rights are ordered in their proper domains.

Catholic Social Teachings use an order of creation theology at many points. While government has a role in establishing and keeping order, for example, freedom of conscience should govern the individual in their worship and ethical behavior.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, governments should allow freedom of religion where more than one

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<sup>12</sup> The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy publishes research and advises the General Assembly on issues of economic justice, human rights, and environmental concerns.

<sup>13</sup> See Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes and Dignitatis Humanae* in *The Documents of Vatican II*, op cit., pps. 229 and 679.

religion exists.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the state must respect the order of creation, allowing the individual to properly order their own domain when it comes to worshipping God.

An example of order of creation theology resulting in a conviction regarding human rights is illustrated by the Puritan free church movement for religious liberty in England in 1645.<sup>15</sup> This early movement for human rights influenced the enlightenment in Europe as individual freedoms became more central to societal mores.<sup>16</sup>

The German Protestant theology of Juergen Moltmann stresses that not only did God create the world in an ordered fashion, the future kingdom of God will include a redressing of the problems that abound in the creation as we know it. Therefore justice and peace must be present and active in the lives of Christians. The church lives in the expectation of the

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<sup>14</sup> See Vatican II, *Dignitatis Humanae*, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, op cit. p. 685.

<sup>15</sup> See Glen Stassen's Forward to Christopher D. Marshall, *Crowned with Glory and Honor: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition*, Telford, PA: Pandora Press U.S., 2001, pps. 11-14.

<sup>16</sup> See David Little's article in this volume.

coming of God's kingdom - a kingdom that embraces peace, righteousness, and the freedom and dignity of humans. For Moltmann, this eschatological vision becomes both a source of hope and an obligation to work for the transformation of society in the present.<sup>17</sup> The essence of the church itself is its engagement in the work of justice.<sup>18</sup>

3. **Human Frailty and Sin.** The other side of Christian attention to human rights on the basis of God's image and the good ordering of creation arises from a theology that recognizes human sin. A belief in the inability of individuals and communities to act rightly makes Christian traditions attentive to both individual wrongs and structural evil in the area of human rights.

According to this theology, although God created the world and pronounced the creation good, human action brought evil into that good world. (Gen. 2) Because of this fallenness, humans cannot do the good

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<sup>17</sup> Juergen Moltmann, *A Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, NY: Harper & Row, 1967, p. 327.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p.328.

that they aspire to (Romans 7 and 15). Instead, even with the best intentions, humans do wrong and mistake evil for good. (Romans 3)

That confusion results in a frail humanity that lacks both the wisdom to reasonably order the world and the will to do good.<sup>19</sup> Human inability to care for themselves and creation according to God's will leads to an emphasis in some traditions on dependence on God to enable people to do right.<sup>20</sup> Other traditions stress human responsibility, developing a constant vigilance that stresses duties over rights.<sup>21</sup> A third theology

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, op cit., p. 166.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, John Wesley's sermon, "The Way to the Kingdom," in *The Works of John Wesley*, V, Gerald R. Cragg, ed, London: Oxford University Press, 1975, p. 78 in which he declares that a person could be orthodox in every point and yet have no religion at all. In the pietistic stream of Christianity, the Bruderhof Community in Europe stands out as an example of dependence on God. Emmy Arnold, cofounder of the community stated that, "Efforts to organize community in a human way can only result in ugly, lifeless caricatures. Only when we are empty and open to the Living One--to the Spirit--can he bring about the same life among us as he did among the early Christians." A *Joyful Pilgrimage: My Life in Community* Farmington, PA: Plough Publishing House, 1999, pps. 168-169.

<sup>21</sup> In Roman Catholic social teachings, according to "*Mater et Magistra*," a community of persons active in the ordering of their lives must be formed, one in which all members are...conscious of their own duties and rights, working on a basis of equality for bringing about of the universal common good., "*Mater et Magistra*," ET as Appendix to E. Guerry, *The Social Teaching of the Church*, 1961, pps. 185, 190, and 208. (Quoted in Moltmann, op cit. p. 318.) In the Reformed tradition, the duties of Christians to act toward reconciliation in society includes action for political,

that develops from the concept of a fallen humanity is a belief in structural evil and a distrust of human institutions.<sup>22</sup>

Various responses arise from these understandings of sin in Christian traditions.

Movements of resistance and liberation can result from evaluating human rights from the point of view of the presence of sin in the world. The anti-slavery movements of England and the U.S. worked against slavery on the basis of the sinfulness of the subjugation of other human beings. John Wilberforce and John Newton in England and Quakers Lucretia Mott and Angelina and Sarah Grimke in the U.S. were Christians who opposed the African slave trade.<sup>23</sup>

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economic, and social rights of all persons. *The Book of Confessions*, op cit., Confession of 1967, Section 4, "Reconciliation in Society" 9:43-9:47, pps. 267-269.

<sup>22</sup> An example can be found in Carl F.H. Henry's discussion of international law in *God, Revelation and Authority Vol. VI. God Who Stands and Stays*. Part 2, Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983 p. 422. Here he argues that because modern rulers do not depend on transcendent law but only protect their own interests, a might makes right philosophy takes over. "In fallen human history," he concludes, "no political document can be presumed to fully elucidate what divine justice implies."

<sup>23</sup> The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, formed in 1833 became the strongest and longest lasting anti-slavery organization. It included black and white, Quaker and non-Quaker participants. Sarah Grimke went on to make the clarion call for women's suffrage basing her argument, "not on Quaker testimony but on the grounds of human rights." Margaret Hope Bacon, *Mothers*

Slaves leader Harriet Tubman and free African-American Frederick Douglass are examples of African American Christians who worked against slavery and for the extension of human rights and citizenship to African-Americans.<sup>24</sup>

New movements of liberation developed in the twentieth century. Christian women involved in the anti-slavery movement turned their attention to women's rights, achieving full citizenship rights for women in the U.S. in 1920.<sup>25</sup> In mid-century, American Catholic theologians and religious joined forces with Protestants to work for self-determination for the colonized peoples of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and other Latin American countries.<sup>26</sup> In 1963, African American

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*of Feminism: The Story of Quaker Women in American*, San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986, pps. 104-105.

<sup>24</sup> Frederick Douglass worked for universal suffrage on the basis of human rights and was dubbed by a white supremacist the father of the nineteenth amendment. "The only true basis of rights was the capacity of individuals, and as for himself, he dared not claim a right which he would not concede to women," said Douglass. *Frederick Douglass on Women's Rights*, Philip S. Foner, ed., NY: DaCapo Press, 1992, pp. ix and 51.

<sup>25</sup> See *Mothers of Feminism* op cit., Chapter 8, "Quaker Women and the Early Suffrage Movement," pps. 120-136.

<sup>26</sup> See articles by Gustavo Gutierrez, Juan Luis Segundo and a letter from Third World Bishops entitled "A Letter to the Peoples of the Third World" in *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History*, Alfred T. Hennelly, S.J. ed., Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990, pps. 29-38; 48-57; 62-76.

churches in Birmingham, Alabama gathered and Martin Luther King Jr. gave voice to their dream of equality that sparked the civil rights movement.<sup>27</sup>

Critiquing society's activities and governmental policies on human rights and responsibilities and calling the public to accountability is another response.<sup>28</sup> Christians have formed coalitions with other religious groups and non-government associations to accomplish this. Martin Luther King Jr. argued that the constitution itself is both a reflection of Christian values and the basis for civil rights. Anti-nuclear protesters Daniel Berrigan and the Plowshares group in Washington D.C. protested U.S. nuclear proliferation by damaging nuclear warheads. Other anti-nuclear groups such as Witness for Peace and the Fellowship of Reconciliation stress the importance of

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<sup>27</sup> *Birmingham Revolutionaries: The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights*. Marjorie L. White and M. Manis, eds. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000, p.vii.

<sup>28</sup> Evangelical Christian Gretchen G. Hull quotes A.W. Tozer on the necessity of a higher authority to provide values and theological understandings that enable Christians to critique society. She points to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's warning against following a human understanding of what Christian action is. "The Complementarity of God's Love and God's Righteousness" in *The Global God: Multi-Cultural Evangelical Views of God*, Aida Bescancon Spencer and William David Spencer, eds. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998,

non-violence in resisting the structural evils of war and nuclear proliferation.<sup>29</sup>

In its long tradition of social teachings, the Catholic Church makes qualifications on human rights due to the danger of self-interest that, according to this tradition, destroys justice. Obedience to truth and respect for rights of others become important considerations that limit human rights for individuals and institutions. For instance, a preferential option for the poor limits the right of the rich to amass as much wealth as they like.<sup>30</sup> Even the church itself must bow to the rights of others to choose their leaders in liberal democratic societies.<sup>31</sup>

Another response to human rights that develops

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pps. 71 and 75.

<sup>29</sup> See article in this volume by John Dear.

<sup>30</sup> Vatican II traces the obligation to the poor back through the history of the church, emphasizing that in extreme necessity all goods are to be shared, and concluding that, "If a person is in extreme necessity, he has the right to take from the riches of others what he himself needs." "The Church Today" in *The Documents of Vatican II*, op cit., p.278.

<sup>31</sup> In the American situation of plurality, John Courtney Murray outlines two distinct orders, civil and religious. Articles of peace are the civil laws that, while not deduced from divine law, are rational and meant to insure peace. In this situation the church defers to the temporal order, not imposing a higher spiritual law on society. See Chapter 2 "Civil Unity and Religious Integrity: the Articles of Peace" in *We Hold These Truths*, John Courtney Murray, S.J., NY: Sheed & Ward, 1960, pps.

from a theology of sin is vigilance in protecting human rights. When the U.S. was founded, Christians that had fled persecution in Europe demanded that freedom of religion be an operative principle in the new federation of states.<sup>32</sup> Because of their theology of sin, these Christians did not trust human institutions to insure citizens' tranquility and freedom to practice their religion.

This emphasis on the necessity of examining institutional policies and protecting individuals and churches from government intrusion fosters the human rights of minority groups today. Limits on government intervention in health care and education are two examples. Jehovah's Witnesses can refuse blood transfusions. Christians can choose home schooling for their children. Christian groups have insisted on limiting government's intrusion on an individual's

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45, 49, and 78.

<sup>32</sup> In a special address at the American Academy of Religion, San Francisco, Nov. 22, 1997, Robert N. Bellah stated that the dominant religious tradition of American beginnings was sectarian religion. It was the radical sects of the Protestant reformation, groups like the Baptists, that gave rise to the movement for freedom of conscience and the right of religious freedom. It was not the influence of the dominant religion of John Winthrop and the Puritans but the work of Baptists like Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island, that insured a society now hospitable to

right to practice their religion.

Conciliar Protestantism takes up this theme from a stance of inclusion rather than separation from society. Having lived through the horrors of World War II, German theologian Juergen Moltmann understands dialog about human rights as a requirement in a sinful world. The World Council of Churches sees human rights as part of the struggle against disorder and evil. During this "Decade Against Violence" declared by the World Council, criticisms of state perpetuated violence and injunctions to the church to struggle against such violence are emphasized by the World Council.<sup>33</sup>

A growing emphasis on the concrete historical situation and the role of churches in working for the protection of human rights around the world is evident in the work of the World Council of Churches, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and other Christian groups. Working against human rights violations takes different forms as cultures and situations demand a human rights response that fits, as much as possible, with cultural

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multiculturalism.

<sup>33</sup> See <http://www.wcc-coe.org> World Council of Churches Home Page for information about projects on the Decade Against Violence.

norms and values.

Freedom of religion as a basic liberty is also contextually determined according to John Courtney Murray's Catholic analysis which became part of Vatican II teachings. Here the Church readjusts its classic teaching on the primacy of the Church in world affairs to an emphasis on "articles of peace" and freedom of conscience which insure religious liberty in pluralistic contexts such as the United States.<sup>34</sup>

Another way to present human rights from a theology of human sinfulness is to highlight its counterpart--human responsibilities. The Reformed tradition generally follows Calvin in stressing human responsibility over human rights. Nineteenth century Reformed theologian Abraham Kuyper understood sin to be a greater threat to human freedom than state power.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> "We, as a people, are agreed that government should not undertake responsibility for the care of the sacred order of religious life; governmental responsibility is limited to a care for the freedom of religion." *We Hold These Truths*, op cit., p.153.

<sup>35</sup> "*Sin* threatens freedom within each sphere just as strongly as *State power* does at the boundary... at the heart of every sphere there smolders and smokes the flame of passion, whence the sparks of sin fly upward, That unholy blaze undermines the moral vitality of life, weakens resiliency, and finally bends the strongest stave. In any successful attack on freedom the state can only be an accomplice. The *chief* culprit is the citizen who

If persons are responsible, rights are protected. But without discipline, an emphasis on rights can lead to excess and sinful behavior. In this view it is better to emphasize duties to balance those possible excesses.

Despite this emphasis, the Presbyterian Church (USA) and other reformed groups, e.g. World Reformed Alliance, have been strong supporters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and actively work against human rights abuses around the world.<sup>36</sup>

The Orthodox churches also make qualifications to human rights because of the dangers presented by self-interest that can destroy justice. Surrender to God and obedience to the church, while not relying on human attempts to do right or protect one's rights, can mitigate against human abuses due to sin. In this view church tradition and authority plays a role in readjusting people's understanding and action regarding

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forgets his duty, wastes his strength in the sleep of sin and sensual pleasure, and so loses the power of *his own initiative*." "Sphere Sovereignty" (1880), Inaugural address at the Free University, in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, James D. Bratt, ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Williams B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998, p.473.

<sup>36</sup> See "Human Rights and the fullness of Life: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Issue," *Church and Society*. PC(USA) Vol.88, No.4, March-April, 1998.

human rights and responsibilities.<sup>37</sup>

Dependence on God and the authority of the church is a response that can lead, not only to vigilance in protection of human rights, but alternatively to a separation from societal life and emphasis on a community set apart from a "sinful world." This view can lead to a withdrawal from working with public institutions or ideas that are purported in "secular" contexts, e.g. human rights. Some Anabaptist traditions, e.g. Amish and Plymouth Brethren, consider their communities to be special enclaves of Christians who should not adopt the practices of the surrounding outsiders. While order is maintained within the community, human rights for all are not a priority. The Amish communities in Indiana and Kentucky reject connection with wrong ideas by not using electricity or modern conveyances such as cars. The Plymouth Brethren show their separation from public life by not celebrating holidays or participating in political

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<sup>37</sup> See *Orthodox Women Speak: Discerning the Signs of the Times*. Kyriaki Karidoyanes Fitzgerald, ed. p.1-2 for a statement on the authority of bishops and formal statements of the church in regards to women's ministries.

elections.<sup>38</sup>

The presence of sin in the world also leads some Christians to a critique of the very idea of human rights. Some Christians, suspicious of human rights, develop anti-human rights perspectives. An emphasis on the fall of humanity can result in a focus on negative qualities and possibilities, resulting in a fear of state authority or other races. Contemporary survivalist Christian movements such as the Christian Identity Movement focus on the negative power of government and the need to protect their group against destruction by others.<sup>39</sup>

Not only anti-authoritarian responses but authoritarian responses can be developed on anti-human rights agendas. An exaggerated emphasis on human inability to do good can be a deterrent to fostering human agency and insuring human rights.<sup>40</sup> In the 1970s,

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<sup>38</sup> The Grant-Kelly exclusive Plymouth Brethren (Group Number 8) do not celebrate any holidays or participate in elections. Many also conscientiously object to military service.

<sup>39</sup> For a history and profile of this movement, see <http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/identity.html>.

<sup>40</sup> Carl Henry states that "A naturalistic exposition of law makes inevitable a positivistic relativizing of law, since naturalism provides no safeguard against totalitarian rulers who authoritatively arbitrate the nature and limits of human liberty;

Protestant Bill Gothard spawned a movement in the U.S. based in a theology of hierarchical authority that limited human freedom. Gothard influenced thousands of Christians to believe that only direct authority could curtail the strong sinful inclinations of persons. He stressed obedience to civil authorities and, with appeals to the Bible and analogies to the animal kingdom, developed strict lines of authority in church and family settings.<sup>41</sup>

A severe view of human sin can also result in a theology that teaches that humans can do nothing good. In this view, good can only come through God. Therefore, complete surrender to God and dependence on God's grace is required of Christ's followers. Human rights disappear from this view as persons are seen as totally sinful and without value. Some Christian leaders use this theology to keep persons from struggling for their rights or the rights of others. The only rights that are valid are the rights to

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it actually puts in doubt the very character and validity of human rights." *God, Revelation, and Authority*, Vol. VI Part 2 op cit. p. 422.

<sup>41</sup> See Bill Gothard's "Umbrella Policy" at his Home Page <http://www.billgothard.com/news/basicseminar.php>. Key topics:

practice and propogate the Christian religion.<sup>42</sup> In this view, Christians are encouraged to remain childlike and dependent on strong leaders for instruction in living.

Understanding anti-human rights views of some Christians is crucial for any attempt to understand various viewpoints and attitudes towards human rights and responsibilities by Christian traditions. Christian ideas of dependence on God, God's will, and God's grace need not result in anti-human rights positions. More often those theologies are used to balance understandings of human rights and serve as constructs in Christian evaluations of human rights and responsibilities.<sup>43</sup>

Christians sometimes use ethical standards of Biblical law rather than the language of human rights to support the values of human rights. Fuller Seminary

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Protection Under Authority.

<sup>42</sup> See Joyce Meyer's article "Your Voice Can Return Our Religious Freedom" at <http://capwiz.com/joycemeyer/issues/alert/?alerted=5245916&type=ml>.

<sup>43</sup> See, for example Christopher D. Marshall's discussion on rights and responsibilities in *Crowned With Glory and Honor: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition*, Telford, op cit., pps. 104-105, and Ismael Garcia's remarks on personal responsibility in "On Human Dignity," in *Insights: The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary*, Vol. 114, No.1, Fall, 1998, p.11.

President Richard Mouw tells a story from his school days that illustrates this. His punishment for making a racial slur to a classmate was to write out the Ten Commandments over one hundred times. The rationale for this discipline was that he was bearing false witness against his neighbor. Mouw implies that the truth, seen clearly by his teacher, was that his fellow student was a human being whose civil rights were violated by this uncivil behavior.<sup>44</sup>

**4. Community and the Human Family.** That the people of God are a part of the human family is a third theological construct that is central to an understanding of human rights for Christians. Two circles of community are important here: the unity of the whole human family and the special community of the church. Christian traditions have articulated those ideas in many ways, but the concepts of brotherhood and covenant stand out as two of the major constructs that describe the relationships of love among humans that

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<sup>44</sup> Richard J. Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992, p. 47-48.

define Christianity.

Israel, believing that they were the chosen people of God, separated themselves from surrounding communities in many ways. They operated out of the idea that they had a special relationship with God--a covenant that required obedience to God and assured God's protection over them. (Deut. 5)

A tradition of care for widows and orphans was part of this covenant. (Old Testament Book of Ruth) This agreement predisposed those communities to protect the human rights of weaker members. Welcoming strangers into their community, protecting slaves and limiting the authority of political leaders, including kings, were also part of the laws of the covenant of Israel. Those expectations point to a universality of human rights hinted at in the tradition, a universality that was sometimes blurred by the subjugation of the Jews by other tribes and the separation of the Jews from surrounding communities.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher D. Marshall argues that despite the ambiguity of the biblical witness ("the bible appears to mandate such human rights abuses as slavery, war, conquest, genocide, the subjugation of women, bridal sale, racial separation, the denial of religious

When the covenantal tradition of the Jews was adopted by Christianity, the basis of belonging to the covenanted people shifted from ethnicity to belief. The writings of the Apostle Paul insisted on the unity of believers and articulated the hope of unity of all creation under Christ. (Colossians, Ephesians) In this way the covenant of the family of God became linked to the brotherhood of all humankind.

The resulting views of human rights emphasize care for the covenanted people of God, the church, and care for the whole human family. The church has a special responsibility to love as Christ loved, to bring the love of God into the world to all people. Evangelicals often speak of the Christian mandate to love others rather than speaking of human rights. Loving others, in this view, requires going beyond a notion of rights to sacrificial love - loving others as Christ loved us.<sup>46</sup> (Ephesians, James)

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freedom to idolaters, and the execution of wrongdoers") yet "The overarching narrative structure of Creation-Fall-Redemption-Consummation, fleshed out in teaching on God's righteousness and the covenantal nature of community, (that) has sweeping implications of a human rights kind," *Crowned With Glory and Honor: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition.* op cit., p.51.

<sup>46</sup> In a chapter on Christian mission and the future (the authors of *Introducing World Missions" A Biblical, Historical and*

The African-American church illustrates the combination of a strong covenanted people with a stress on the brotherhood/sisterhood of all. Founded in slave religion, an African-American culture of survival emphasized the liberation of God's people from oppression and the spiritual power inherent in the African notion of the sacredness of all of life.<sup>47</sup> The "brotherhood of man," therefore, requires equality for all. Securing human rights through community action became a central theme of the African-American church. Both liberation from slavery and the active struggle against human rights abuses during the civil rights era utilized the covenanted people of God working together for the universal rights of all.<sup>48</sup> This ideal of brotherhood continues to be demonstrated in the

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*Practical Survey*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004,) make the challenge to love sacrificially, "Missionaries may very well find themselves at the epicenter of devastation on a global scale unheard of in human history. Will they be prepared to minister in love in the midst of such tragedy? By God's grace they will, though the price may be higher than today's church can ever imagine." p. 313.

<sup>47</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of the Afro-American People*, Second Edition, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983, p. 219 and 222.

<sup>48</sup> Dwight Perry *Breaking Down Barriers: A Black Evangelical Explains the Black Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998, pps. 106-107.

willingness of African/American Christians to include others in their associations, despite continued discrimination against them.

The Reformed tradition uses the idea of covenant in a pro-active way to underscore the orders of creation theology that God has given Christians special responsibilities as part of the human family. As the people of God, brought into a special relationship with God through Christ, Christians bear a responsibility to act in love to others, to participate in God's liberating actions in history, and to care for the world.<sup>49</sup> Christians are duty-bound to protect, not only their own rights, but the rights of others.

This theology is active in conciliar Protestantism as shown in the work of the World Council of Churches as well as the World Reformed Alliance of Churches. Protection of human rights in areas where abuses of human rights abound becomes a focus of attention in groups working out of this community construct. For example, the Presbyterian Church (USA)'s *Human Rights*

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<sup>49</sup> *Selected Theological Statements of the Presbyterian Church (USA) General Assemblies (1956-1998)*, Presbyterian Church (USA), 1998, pps. 65-66.

*Update* gives information on human rights abuses and shows how Presbyterians can add their voices to alleviating those abuses. The World Council of Churches focuses on a different area of human rights each decade: the decade for women, the decade for children, and currently, the decade against violence.

When the United States was founded, the Baptists were an important force in protecting the religious liberties of all people. They vigorously opposed a state church to protect the freedom to worship that had caused them to flee from Europe. Their survival as a community of Christians was at the heart of this movement. At the same time, they helped to secure the same rights for all people. This movement and similar efforts have resulted in the pluralism in the U.S. that has continued to expand. Today the rights of all to religious freedom is central to our national identity.

The Quakers also strongly supported the freedom of all to worship as their conscience dictated. The community of the whole family of God, universal brotherhood, was strongly upheld by Quaker founder George Fox and his followers. Pennsylvania, founded by

William Penn, was the first state to support freedom of religion for all, thus avoiding the religious persecutions that characterized Massachusetts and other areas of the fledgling nation. Today the unprogrammed Friends, the liberal wing of Quakerism, take a strong stand for universal human rights and the ending of violence through political oppression and wars.

The peace movement centered in the Catholic Church also works against war and violence on the basis of a theology of the human family. Catholics have joined with persons of all faiths to protest the proliferation of nuclear weapons.<sup>50</sup> Their work is part of a broader effort by the Roman Catholic church to interpret morality to society. The Church understands the state to have a limited role in protecting human rights. The voice of the Church also needs to be heard, a voice that emphasizes the rights of family and communities and is committed to the flourishing of the whole human family.

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<sup>50</sup> E.g. Witness for Peace brings together people of all faiths to work against nuclear arms proliferation and political injustices perpetuated by governmental policies.

## **Contributions of Christian Traditions to Human Rights**

The beliefs about human rights described above display a diversity of theologies and approaches. Those perspectives find their sources in understandings of the image of God, creation, sin, and community. The diversity of those approaches offers a variety of emphases that can be used to further understandings and actions to support human rights in today's world.

The four theological sources for Christian views of human rights are assertions that are based in an ontological understanding of humans, God, and the world. While specific organizations and delineations of those views differ according to the history and societal settings in which they arose, the belief in a cosmology that exists beyond the material world and the social constructions of reality--a metaphysical sourcing -- is operative in them all.

In the transition between modern and postmodern understandings of human rights, the faith-based sources of human rights in Christian and other religious traditions can add strength and bring harmony to other

sources.

The *universality of human rights* becomes difficult to argue now that postmodern understandings of the situatedness of all knowledge and the cultural-conditionedness of expressions of knowledge are evident.<sup>51</sup> John Rawls argued for a rational justification for human rights in *A Theory of Justice* (1971). More recently he moved from an "original condition" to a situated one which calls for human rights in societies striving for a democratic form of governance. Arguments for an autonomous moral discourse presuppose the search for universals that marks the modern period. If the discourse becomes situated, as Rawls attempts to locate the "original condition" in liberal democracies, the universality of the discourse evaporates.

Another universal argument sources human rights in the sacredness of persons. Ronald Dworkin argues for a sacredness of human beings *without* sourcing that belief

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<sup>51</sup> See Chapter 3 "Are Human Rights Universal?: The Relativist Challenge and Related Matters" in *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* by Michael J. Perry, NY: Oxford University Press, 1998, pps. 57ff.

in religious convictions.<sup>52</sup> But the notion of sacredness itself is linked to the idea of transcendence.

Some who have more fully embraced a post-modern situated and interpreted view of a socially constructed reality find themselves arguing for incommensurable differences among cultures. The Asian values debate exemplifies this point of view.<sup>53</sup> Viewing human rights as distinctly Western and modern leads to a relativistic view of human rights that prevents the possibility of human rights from being used as a starting point for international discourse.

Kenneth Morris finds a way through this dilemma by arguing for a communitarian synthesis that sees the possibility of human rights values in what he describes as a common experience among cultures. As cultures come into conflict, reciprocity and equality arise as values to arbitrate difference. As such, Morris claims

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<sup>52</sup> "Some readers will take particular exception to the term 'sacred' because it will suggest to them that the conviction I have in mind is necessarily a theistic one. I shall try to explain why it is not, and how it may be, and commonly is, interpreted in a secular way." *Life's Dominion: An Argument About Abortion, Euthanasia, and Individual Freedom*, (1993), p. 25 quoted in Michael Perry, op cit., p.108, note 13.

those values are universally available and lead to a human rights ethic.<sup>54</sup>

The weakness of Morris' position is that, as a theoretical argument, he cites no empirical evidence that such common values arise in situations of conflict. Sourcing human rights in humanitarian "sacredness" or human dignity, autonomous moral discourse, or common human experience of shared values are arguments that are each thin in themselves in supporting a universal value of human rights.

However, religious traditions, Christianity in this case, can bring those arguments together in a faith-based ontological framework that strengthens each of them. Human rationality and the notion of the moral impulses of persons and communities find support in Christian tradition. Moral discourse need not be "autonomous" but sourced in the religious tradition. The sacredness of persons also finds a stronger base in the Judeo-Christian notion of humans created in the

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<sup>53</sup> See Ng Kam Weng's article in this volume.

<sup>54</sup> "Western Defensiveness and the Defense of Rights: A Communitarian Alternative" in *Negotiating Culture and Human Rights*, Lynda S. Bell, Andrew J. Nathan and Ilan Peleg, eds., NY: Columbia University Press, 2001, p.68-95.

image of God than in a humanitarian intuition that persons are of inestimable worth. The Christian idea that God redeems the world through Christ further strengthens the value of persons in the Christian view.

The common experience of shared values of reciprocity and human equality as sources for human rights need not remain theoretical. Those experiences, documented in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, can be interpreted as precursors to the rise of human rights.

As the Christian tradition is used to source human rights as a universal value, the support for human rights from arguments of autonomous moral discourse, human sacredness or dignity, and common experience of the values that support human rights can be harmonized. Taken together those arguments present a stronger case for human rights than each does as it stands alone. Religious sensibilities and faith are then included in the dialog which allows for a critical standard to be invoked that can critique cultural perceptions and arbitrate cultural differences.

## **Christian Views in Dialog**

The argument above is one example of the way Christian sources for human rights can augment philosophical views when placed in dialog. Theologies and values of other religions also present an arena for meaningful discourse about human rights.

Arvind Sharma's work on the Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions has brought the discussion of religious values that support human rights to the fore. The Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions demonstrates that religions carry common convictions that can be interpreted in the human rights framework developed by the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights. Ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue can also be fostered by a clear identification of Christian themes in the Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions.

This dialogical project leads to further questions. What kinds of human rights emphases are most important in our world today--a justice or care emphasis, an individual or a communal emphasis, a

protective or a liberative focus? How can Christian theologies be used to support the views of human rights articulated in both the U.N. Declaration and the Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions? What kinds of actions might arise as Christian groups dialog and cooperate with others in the struggle for human rights in today's world?

As Christians and people of all religions struggle with those questions, working to articulate and practice their convictions about human rights, they can join together to support human rights arguments from philosophies and cultures across the globe. In this way, commitments to respecting all people and working to see the value of each person upheld within and between communities will be strengthened.

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