

Universal Rights or Personal Relations?

Patrick H. Byrne
Philosophy Department
Boston College

I. Human Rights and Human Dignity

When we speak of human rights, we often have in mind the sort of listing found in the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Mary Ann Glendon traces the drama that led to that Declaration in her highly regarded book *The World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.¹ Glendon observes that in the years immediately following the end of the Second World War there opened a brief window of opportunity for developing such a Declaration. Glendon tells the story of how Eleanor Roosevelt and her colleagues on the UN Human Rights Commission were able both to formulate and to gain acceptance for that Declaration, before that window closed as cooperation among the victorious allies quickly hardened into deep mistrust and obstinacy.

Not surprisingly, competing national self-interests and alarm at Soviet expansionism posed serious obstacles in the path toward the formulation of an acceptable Declaration. Yet another kind of obstacle was posed by disagreements about the very principles that would underpin the document. After considerable debate, the Commission prudently resolved to develop a listing of rights that all could agree upon, despite their differences on matters of principle. As French philosopher Jacques Maritain put it at the time, the agreement would have to be “not on the basis of common speculative ideas, but on common practical ideas.”² Glendon continues,

¹ Mary Ann Glendon, *The World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, (NY: Random House, 2001).

² *Ibid.*, 77.

If there are some things so terrible in practice that virtually no one will publicly approve them, and some things so good in practice that virtually no one will oppose them, a common project can move forward without agreement on the reasons for those positions.³

The resulting Declaration lists as rights due to every human being the familiar sorts of civil/political rights that formed the backbone of the Bill of Rights in the United States: the rights to life, liberty, property, freedom of expression, religion, movement, peaceful assembly, and due process. It also includes socio/economic rights that rose to prominence later in the nineteenth century, such as the right to work, to join unions, to education, and to an adequate standard of living (including medical care, clothing and housing).⁴ In a recent article, John Haughey remarks that a third category of rights, group/cultural rights, also has begun to win acceptance since the promulgation of the UN Declaration in 1948.⁵ Yet even these rights are intimated, if somewhat vaguely, when the Declaration speaks of “the right to a nationality” and “the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community.”⁶

Given the ever increasing barriers to cooperation that were rising in this period, it was indeed prudent to concentrate upon a practical list of rights where consensus could be reached. Still, the questions regarding principles cannot be evaded forever. Eventually the very commitment to practical ideas erodes if questions of principles are not faced and resolved. As Maritain put it, agreement about human rights can be maintained “on condition no one asks why.”⁷ But the question of why can only be deferred at risk of losing commitment to human rights in the long run.⁸ More recently

³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴ See *ibid.*, 310-14.

⁵ This paper is inspired by and intended as a complement to John C. Haughey, S.J.’s “Responsibility for Human Rights: Contributions from Bernard Lonergan,” *Theological Studies*, 63 (2002), 764-85.

⁶ Glendon, *op. cit.*, 312-13.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁸ See Haughey, *op. cit.*, 780-81.

another kind of challenge to the commitment to human rights, demanding an answer to “Why?”, has arisen as to whether or not the very idea as well as the specific enumeration of human rights is not based upon a Western prejudice. Was not the Declaration, after all, just another more subtle form of Western imperialism, imposing specifically Western cultural values upon non-Western peoples? This challenge has been advanced in various forms by certain religious leaders, by totalitarian leaders of certain nations, and in discussions by post-modern thinkers in the West.⁹ While each of these criticisms must be viewed carefully for its deepest motivations, there is something persuasive in their various appeals to the importance of particularity and situatedness in thinking about human rights, features that are eliminated as irrelevant in universalist foundations of human rights. The next section looks more closely at some of these universalist approaches to answering why we should affirm human rights.

II. Universal Human Dignity and the Problem of Impersonalism

Both at the time of the UN Commission and more recently, attempts to provide principles that ground human rights have been articulated in terms of the notion of “human dignity.” Rights are understood as “indispensable for [one’s] dignity”; that is rights are both what is owed to the dignity of each human being, and what are the necessary conditions for the realization of human dignity.¹⁰ The UN Declaration, for example, begins with the words:

recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.¹¹

⁹ *Ibid.*, 764.

¹⁰ Glendon, *op. cit.*, 313.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 310.

But what exactly is meant by human dignity? In the Commission's discussions, some members emphasized individual liberty as the core of human dignity, while others stressed the intrinsically social dimensions of being human as the root of human dignity. The very notion of human dignity itself, while powerful and compelling, was and continues to be somewhat vague and contested.

Arguably the terminology of respect and dignity in relation to human rights comes into Western thought with the writings of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant made the powerful claim that "morality and humanity, insofar as it is capable of morality, *alone* have dignity."¹² Kant based his claim on his analysis of morality that "already dwells in the natural sound understanding and needs not so much to be taught as merely to be elucidated."¹³ Kant argues that this ordinary sense of morality consists in human "respect" for the rationality of law, especially as demarcated by its universality. Because this respect-worthy universal moral law already resides in every person's "ordinary reason," Kant argues, each and every rational being deserves the same respect owed to moral law itself. This fact leads to Kant's famous formulation of the moral categorical imperative as a principle of human dignity: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means."¹⁴

At first hearing, Kant's strong claim regarding human dignity sounds inspirational. Yet it has certain features that become troublesome upon closer inspection. For one thing, Kant's understanding of the principle of human dignity is closely allied with his radical conception of human autonomy. Kantian morality is

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, (James W. Ellington, trans.), (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981), 40-41 <435>, emphasis added; cited hereafter as *Grounding*.

¹³ *Grounding*, 9 <397>.

moral precisely because it is the result of one's own reason, not of any outside influence. While this insistence has the salutary effect of staving off inauthentic external influences, it also has a radically isolating dimension. Kant wrote for example,

there are many persons who are so sympathetically constituted that, without any further motive of vanity or self-interest, they find an inner pleasure in spreading joy around them ... But I maintain that in such a case an action of this kind, however dutiful and amiable it may be, has nevertheless no true moral worth.”¹⁵ (11)

Despite his remarkable affirmation of the high moral worth of human dignity, there is an impersonalism to Kant's way of grounding that value. It regards human beings as detached from the personal connections that enrich and particularize their unique lives. It is an impersonalism that sits uncomfortably with Christian faith.

There is also a kind of impersonalism underlying the account of human rights offered somewhat earlier by John Locke. For Locke, all rights are derived from the basic rights of life, liberty, and property (the latter was softened into “pursuit of happiness” when Locke's principles were incorporated into the final draft of the U.S. Declaration of Independence). Locke appeals to a state of nature, governed by a law of nature, in order to ground his account of basic rights. The irrepressible instinct for self-preservation of biological existence is one of those foundations. The other is a radically individualized version of liberty: “a *state of perfect freedom* to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons, as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave, or depending upon the will of any other man.”¹⁶ Locke developed his philosophy of rights in resistance to a distorted tradition about the legitimacy of political power, and his influence has certainly advanced human liberty

¹⁴ *Grounding*, 36 <429>.

¹⁵ *Grounding*, 11 <398>.

on a grand scale. Nevertheless, his was an understanding of liberty that detaches individual bearers of rights from recognizing their many indebtednesses to and responsibilities for other human beings. These moral relations to others are radically reduced to merely refraining from causing bodily harm to others. Again, so minimal and anti-communal conception of human rights is not easy to reconcile with the commandment to love one's neighbor that is central to the spirit of Christianity.

More recently, in his *Theory of Justice*, U.S. philosopher John Rawls sought to develop Kant's basic ideas. He sought to do so, however, in a way that avoided Kant's transcendental idealism and was more acceptable to the "Anglo-American tradition of moral and political thought in which Rawls' work is firmly installed."¹⁷

Rawls approaches the question of rights and justice by means of his two principles: the "liberty principle" and the "difference principle." His liberty principle pertains to civil/political rights and requires that any truly just society must insure to each citizen basic liberties such as freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, and due process of law. In Rawls' words: "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others." On the other hand, his difference principle addresses the issue of equitable distribution of socio/economic rights such as wealth and social position. Unlike the liberty principle, Rawls formulates this principle in negative terms: "social and economic *inequalities* are to be arranged so that they are ... reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage."¹⁸ Rawls argues

¹⁶ See for example John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 1980), 8; the emphasis is Locke's own.

¹⁷ Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 25.

¹⁸ Emphasis added; the full text of the difference principle reads: "social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) reasonably expected to be to everyone's advantage, and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all." John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (NY: Oxford University Press, 1971), 60. Both principles undergo considerable refinement and reformulation through Rawls's book, but these nuances do not overcome the problem of impersonalism.

that these two principles must be “lexically ordered.” That is to say, that the criterion for political and civil rights (liberty principle) must be satisfied before moving on to the criterion for economic and social rights (difference principle).¹⁹

Rawls’s lexical ordering has come in for considerable criticism, however. It seems to neutralize the second principle altogether. Consider for example the extremely difficult problem of equitable access to health care. If those who cannot afford either direct payment or insurance to cover their health care needs, and if those with surplus wealth do not freely choose to donate their resources to serve the poor, the lexical ordering would seem to rule against any form of mandatory taxation that would bring about equitable distribution of health care.²⁰

While Rawls endeavored to develop a more adequate basis for human rights, his theory of justice is still characterized by the same sort of impersonalism that is found in Kant’s philosophy. Rawls argues for both of his principles and their lexical ordering on the basis of what he called “the original position.” The original position plays a role in Rawls’s philosophy similar to that played by “the state of nature” in the writings of John Locke and other founders of modern political theory such as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The original position is a hypothetical situation characterized by a “veil of ignorance” in which “no one know his place in society, his class position or social status, nor does anyone know his fortune in the distribution of natural assets

¹⁹ Ibid., 42-43. I note in passing that these two principles do not clearly and distinctly address the third category of rights noted by Haughey: group/cultural rights. These could be thought of as falling under the category of social goods [“social status”] but if so, they are included in a way that is both vague and marginal.

²⁰ See for example David Hollenbach, *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition*, (NY: Paulist Press, 1979). p. 17. Rawls modified and nuanced his position regarding the principles of justice in an important later work, *Political Liberalism*, but as far as I am able to discern, he did not successfully resolve this fundamental difficulty, nor did he overcome the problem of impersonalism.

and abilities, his intelligence, strength, and the like.”²¹ The burden of Rawls argument is to show that, under condition of this veil of ignorance, every rational person would choose the two principles with their lexical ordering. Since these principles will be chosen without knowing one’s own situation, Rawls argues that they will not be designed to advance the interests of certain individuals in particular sets of circumstances.²²

Hence according to Rawls these principles and the rights that they underpin are just and fair, precisely because they are principles that do not favor any particular person. Indeed this rigorous, impersonal fairness is the aspect of Rawls theory that many have found to be its most attractive feature. Still, there is something quite troubling about the impersonalism that is thought to be essential to the basis of rights and human dignity in Kant, Locke, Rawls and similar thinkers. Rights pertain to individuals that are hardly recognizable as persons. In Kant’s thought the only quality that makes a person be a person is her or his reasoning capacity to think universal law. In Locke it is their instinct for survival and detachment for others. In Rawls’s veil of ignorance, the subject of rights is shorn of every feature ordinarily taken to constitute personhood: gender, race, ethnicity, place in society, natural assets and abilities, intelligence, etc. If the judgment about my dignity is not made about me in my personal, concretely constituted and interpersonally situated life – if that judgment is made, rather, about some partial and abstract quality of mine – then it seems that what matters to me most is irrelevant to my true worth.

Rejection of this sort of abstract impersonalism also underlay the sharp edge of Malcolm X’s critique of the civil rights movement. Malcolm called for more than rights

²¹ Rawls, *op. cit.*, 12.

to assemble and speak as white people did: “Human rights! Respect as *human beings!* That’s what American black masses want.”²³ His indictment was of what he perceived to be a kind of impersonalism in civil rights. Mere legal accommodation did not address the deeper issue of human dignity, especially the right of African Americans to be respected precisely as black-skinned people, and not merely as abstract individuals to respected only insofar as they were stripped of their racial and historical particularities. Of course Malcolm X seriously misunderstood Martin Luther King, Jr. on this point. From a very early stage, King envisioned his movement as precisely a revolution in human dignity, a revolution in personal relations.²⁴ In the next sections of this paper, I will explore how a Christian understanding of personal relations can restore a richness to the ideas of human dignity and human rights that seems to be missing in the impersonalism of the modern philosophical groundings.

III. A Christian Theory of Personal Relations

In what follows I will propose a sketch of an approach to the foundation of human dignity and human rights that is grounded not in an abstract conception of reason, but in the rich and concrete network of personal relations that constitutes the very being of each and every human being. In this sketch I will be relying upon the reflections on personal relations by Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan. To anticipate, I will argue that each person’s personal value (personal status) is constituted by the actual, concrete network of personal relations in which she (or he) finds herself (himself). Further, the

²² See however Sandel’s rejection of this claim, *op. cit.*

²³ *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (with the assistance of Alex Haley), (NY: Grove Press, Inc., 1965), 272; the emphasis is Malcolm’s.

actual network of personal relations that constitutes the worth of each person includes various relationships with other human beings, as well as relationships with the divine Persons of the Triune God. In their relations with human beings, the divine Persons do not rely upon a form of reasoning that grasps abstract universals (Kant notwithstanding²⁵). Rather, the divine Persons enter into personal relations by means of something that is universally comprehensive of all the particularities of every person, namely Their unconditional loving embrace and valuation of every being. These actual networks of personal relations determine both the valuation of the human dignity of each human being, as well as the social, economic, political and cultural institutions that make possible our cooperative ventures. Finally, I will argue that human rights are guarantees that make it possible for human beings to participate these patterns of personal relations and institutional cooperation.

Bernard Lonergan's interest in the phenomena of personal relations traces back at least to the publication in 1957 of his philosophical masterwork, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*. That book is often regarded of as a work about epistemology. Yet in its concluding "Epilogue," Lonergan remarked:

Since I believe personal relations can be studied adequately only in [a] larger and more concrete context, the skimpy treatment accorded them in the present work is not to be taken as a denial of their singular importance in human living.²⁶

²⁴ See for example p. 293 of Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," pp. 289-302 in James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), hereafter cited as "Letter."

²⁵ See for example *Grounding*, 20-21 <408-409>.

²⁶ Bernard Lonergan *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 3, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 754; cited hereafter as *Insight*.

Some years later he explained that he had originally intended *Insight* to extend into theological areas including the question of personal relations, but his appointment to a teaching post at the Gregorian University in Rome compelled him to “round off” the book short of that intended objective.²⁷

Lonergan provided at least a glimpse of what he had in mind regarding personal relations in a summer lecture course that he offered at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio in the year following the publication of *Insight*. In that course he set forth an intermediate version of what he came to call his theory of the structure of the human good.²⁸ In that theory he proposed a structure or framework for analyzing human social arrangements in terms of their value dimensions. That structure identifies three, interrelated levels: a level of material goods (“particular goods”) that a given social arrangement makes available; a level of institutional order (“good of order”) that is the intelligible cooperative pattern of social arrangement; and a level of personal relations.²⁹

Particular goods are those items or occasions that satisfy of our recurring needs and desires, the most obvious of which are the recurring needs for sustaining our bodily existence and health.

²⁷ Bernard Lonergan, “*Insight Revisited*,” in *A Second Collection*, (William F. Ryan, S.J. and Bernard J. Tyrrell, S.J., eds.), (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974), 268. The main body text of *Insight* was 748 pages in its 1958 edition; it is 770 pages in the 1992 University of Toronto Press edition.

²⁸ The lectures of that summer course have been edited and collected in Bernard Lonergan, *Topics in Education*, Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, vol. 10, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993), 32-43; cited hereafter as *Topics*. The most mature, albeit not the most detailed, version of his theory of the structure of the human good is found in Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 47-52; hereafter cited as *Method*.

²⁹ By “institutions” and “good of order” Lonergan intends a very broad class of informal as well as formal social arrangements. In his sense, a particular family, a particular neighborhood, a group of friends getting together each week to play softball, and a publicly administered beach are institutions, as much as are a business, a bank, a school, a court of law or a hospital.

The goods of order are the institutional patterns of cooperation and organization.

Goods of order

are concrete, dynamic, and ordered totalities of desirable objects, desiring subjects, operations, and enjoyments. Thus, for example, ... [in] the economic order of a whole region ... the economic goods are greatly increased or decreased in the measure that the total economy is [intelligently] organized for the better or [unintelligently] changed for the worse.³⁰

These institutional patterns originate in what Lonergan called “insights”: those acts of intelligence and understanding that come up with ever new skills, and ever new ways to organize skills into roles, and roles into institutions, so that we may achieve by cooperation and organization what we could not achieve separately. Institutional patterns are “good” to the extent that people work together on the basis of insights of mutual understanding, and to the extent that institutional patterns are constantly adapted, improved and refined through implementation of ever new insights. An institutional order is not good if it only follows some rigid, universal concepts of how things must be done.

The level of personal relations pertains to *how* people treat one another. Two people can be performing exactly the same roles and tasks (e.g., nurse) in the very same kind of institution (e.g., hospital) in two different cities, but they might be treating their patients and co-workers in very different ways. Those different ways of interacting with people in the same institutional patterns constitute the concrete patterns of personal relations. The ways that people treat one another in, say, their hospital roles usually reflect the pattern of personal relations of the local culture. One hospital will feel warm and welcoming while another will feel cold and business-like, even though both

³⁰ John F. Brezovec, unpublished translation of Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *De Deo Trino: II. Pars Systematica seu Divinarum Personarum Conceptio Analogica*, 210; cited hereafter as *De Deo Trino: II.*

hospitals might be equally good at treating medical problems. How groups of people treat one another while performing their institutional roles constitutes their networks of personal relations.

Personal relations originate in feelings, but they do not reside merely internally in sentiments. Personal relations depend upon ideas, but they do not reside in some merely idealistic realm. Personal relations reside in *how* people actually deal with one another *in doing* activities in their institutional and social settings.

Furthermore, the lived reality of personal relations is the most concrete embodiment of the values in social institutions. A group of people reveals the values to which they are collectively committed in the ways that they treat one another. Lonergan observes that there is an intimate connection between the level of personal relations and the intelligible patterns of cooperation that occur in the institutional level of the “good of order”:

the two can also be united insofar as the person emerges with personal status within the [good of] order. Then the order is an order between persons, and the good of order is apprehended, not so much by studying the [institutional] schemes of [recurrent activities] and determining the schemes in which human goods occur, but by apprehending human relations... [T]he simplest and most effective apprehension of the good of order is in the apprehension of personal relations.³¹

Lonergan’s use of the phrase “personal status” here refers to how a person is valued. That valuation is effected and constituted socially by the entire pattern of personal relations. A given person’s value (or “status”) is implicitly defined by her or his location in a concrete, really existing pattern of relations among other persons. The meanings and values of recurring patterns of institutional interactions is what Lonergan

³¹ *Topics*, 41.

calls “cultural values.”³² Cultural values are carried in the ways that people in that culture (or sub-culture) relate to one another, in the pattern of their intricate and intimate personal relations. This pattern of cultural values may be expressed in stories, legends, gestures, rituals, monuments, and so on, but those expressions derive their meaning from and live on in the ongoing pattern of personal relations. The cultural valuation of a person is effected by the cultural pattern into which she or he is thrown. No one can constitute the value of her or his personhood (her or his personal status) all alone.

Certain values will hold the highest place of culture in one set of personal relations, while other values will be prominent elsewhere. In one society success in competitive sports will predominate, whereas *joi d’vivre* will be preeminent in another. Other values (e.g., hard work, intellectual pursuits, artistic creativity, family affection, honesty, loyalty, modesty, generosity, etc.) rank nearer or farther away from the preeminent value, forming a particular culture’s scale of value priorities. The preeminent value and its associated scale of values is to be discerned in the ways that certain people and their actions are honored, while others are ignored, or even despised. In these patterns of how people are treating each other, each person is being valued more highly, or more lowly, or outright devalued, in terms of the scale of values that is implicit in these patterns of interpersonal regard and interaction. A person’s “dignity” is the value bestowed upon (or denied to) that person in the particular, concrete network of personal relations within which they live and move and have their being.

Clearly, the account of personal relations offered thus far faces a serious objection from the perspective of universal human rights. A given culture values some people

³² *Method*, 39.

more highly than others, whereas universal human rights affirms an unconditional worth (dignity) of every human being. But the preceding account of personal relations is still not complete, for the theological dimensions of personal relations have not yet been included. These theological dimensions lift the patterns of personal relations above the sorts of cultural limitations and prejudices that universal human rights seeks to remedy.

After joining the faculty at the Gregorian University, Lonergan began offering his courses on the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Triune God.³³ Most of his work on this topic focused on developing a quite technical “analogical” theory about the personal relations among the three divine Persons within the oneness of God. The details of that theory would require a lengthy tangential digression, which must be foregone for present purposes.³⁴ Two key points however are relevant: (i) that the very essences of the divine Persons are constituted by their mutual personal relations (or “processions” to use traditional language); and (ii) that those personal relations are relations of unconditional love and unrestricted mutual understanding.

Using his explorations of the relations internal to God among the three divine Persons, Lonergan then developed his theology of the divine “missions.” Through the missions of the Son and Spirit, the divine personal relations are communicated to

³³ Lonergan offered courses on the Triune God between 1957 and 1964, for which he wrote and revised a text to be used by the students. For the most advanced version of his treatment of personal relations in that context, see Bernard J. F. Lonergan, S.J., *De Deo Trino: I. Pars Dogmatica; II. Pars Systematica seu Divinarum Personarum Conceptio Analogica*, (Rome: Gregorian University, 1964).

³⁴ Lonergan’s theology offers no more than an “imperfect understanding,” for Lonergan affirmed the utter transcendent mystery of God. Hence, his theology did not pretend to offer a direct explanation of the divine Trinity. The best that this theology could offer was an analogous (“imperfect”) understanding of the Trinity. Following traditional lines, Lonergan sought the best possible analogous understanding of the Persons by means of the relations, or “processions,” within the one eternal God. Lonergan explores how the processions of unrestricted understanding and unconditional loving constitute each of the divine Persons both as divine and as Persons. In their relationships they love and value and constitute one another unconditionally. As Lonergan puts it, “Father, Son, and Spirit are persons ... on the basis of relationships both with each other and with us.” *De Deo Trino: II, op. cit.*, 128.

human beings. In speaking of “divine missions” Lonergan had in mind such scriptural passages as: “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (*John* 20:21); and “When the Advocate comes whom I will send you from the Father, the Spirit of truth that proceeds from the Father, he will testify to me.” (*John* 15:26). These and similar passages affirm that the First Person of the Trinity (whom Jesus called Father) sends forth on missions to humanity the Second and Third Persons (Son and Holy Spirit). Further, as the Gospel passages indicate, somehow human beings are incorporated into participating in these divine missions (“so I send you”).

Lonergan explores what it means for the purely internal divine personal relationships of unconditional love and understanding to enter into the network of finite human relationships by God’s initiative. Because the Son is sent to humanity, and because to be the Son is to be in relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit, these divine relationships enter into and transform human relationships through the mediation of the Son.

Likewise, the mission of the Holy Spirit also brings the divine relationships of unconditional love and unrestricted mutual understanding into play within the pattern of human personal relationships. In this regard, Lonergan would frequently quote the passage from St. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* (5:5): “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” Lonergan identified the gift of the Holy Spirit with the religious experience of “being in love in an unconditional fashion.”³⁵ He agreed with St. Paul that this experience is not primarily a matter of our love for God. It is, rather, God’s own love poured into us. It is God’s infinite and unconditional love of everything about every thing and every one – in all of our

³⁵ *Method*, 105-106.

particularities, concretely situated as we are, living out our lives in performing our responsibilities in very concrete institutions.

Although he was a Catholic theologian and priest, Lonergan was nevertheless quite emphatic that the self-gift of God's love in the mission of the Holy Spirit is not at all restricted to Christianity. Lonergan argued that this gift and the experience of it is transcultural, and that it is the transcendent basis of all genuine religions, non-Christian as well as Christian.³⁶ As Lonergan put it, the Holy Spirit has an "invisible" mission that touches the inner heart of every human being and thereby transforms the pattern of human personal relations in many different religious settings. On the other hand, whereas Christ is also for all humankind, still Christ has a specific "visible" mission that originates at a particular place and time and emanates outward as His disciples outwardly preach the good news of God's personal entry into our personal relations.³⁷

IV. Personal Relations, Human Dignity, and Human Rights

The ultimate goal of the divine missions, as Lonergan put it, "is the divine good itself."³⁸ The divine missions ultimately draw humanity ever more into the fullness of the loving embrace of the personal relations among the three divine Persons. The divine missions achieve this by transforming all aspects and all levels of human interactions.

As Lonergan put it:

all other goods of order are external imitations of that good of order which is to be observed in the Blessed Trinity itself ... nonetheless ... the economy of salvation ... not only imitates the order of the Blessed Trinity, but ... it also in some manner participates in that order. Therefore,

³⁶ *Method*, 108-109, 278-83. See also Frederick E. Crowe, S.J., "Lonergan's Universalist View of Religion," *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies*, 12 (1994), 147-79.

³⁷ *De Deo Trino: II*, 209ff.

³⁸ *De Deo Trino: II*, 211.

the very divine persons who eternally proceed from the Father are also sent by the Father in time to inaugurate and to confirm new interpersonal relationships of reconciliation and love with human persons.³⁹

Lonergan interprets Christian images, such as the “Kingdom of God” and the “economy of salvation,” as pertaining to this entry of the divine personal relations into human personal relations. This newly inaugurated pattern of personal relations “is said to be a kingdom because it is similar to the political good of order” or to be “an economy of salvation because it is similar to the good of order manifested in discovering, producing, and administering material realities.”⁴⁰ In other words, the transformed personal relations are lived out in institutional patterns (goods of order) in which persons cooperate with one another to meet their needs and realize their highest values. Reciprocally, the transformed personal relations determine what kinds of institutional patterns will be appropriate to the living out of these relations.

It is to those whom we love that we wish to communicate goods. That the goods occur, we freely cooperate; ... to make cooperation more efficacious we acquire the necessary habits and disdain the opposed defects. Thus, on the supposition of a union of love, all else that makes for a good of order follows, as is especially the case in marriage.⁴¹

The loving personal relations of a family guide the planning of how to organize so as to meet the needs of the family. Likewise, as new needs and conditions come along, love of one’s school, company, neighborhood, city, or country also guides the exercise of intelligence in improving and adapting institutional structures, in order to maintain the commitment to the objects of that love. But of course in his discussion of the divine missions, Lonergan was primarily focused upon the love of God and the love of all that God understands and loves in the way that God loves them because God loves them.

³⁹ *De Deo Trino: II*, 212.

⁴⁰ *De Deo Trino: II*, 211.

⁴¹ *De Deo Trino: II*, 211.

When God's unconditionally loving personal relations gain a foothold, then human beings use their intelligences, their critical reasoning, and their personal responsibility to devise the organizations and institutions, roles and skills that are needed to nourish and foster those loving relations on this earth.

In this way, the entry of God's divine personal relations into human personal relations establishes the most profound foundation for the notions of human dignity and human rights. Because of God's unconditional understanding, God knows each and every human being as she or he is situated in all her or his unique, concrete, institutional relations with all other beings. Through God's unconditional love, God values each and every person as she or he exists in her or his unique network of relationships. Through the divine missions God communicates that unconditional value of each person. That unconditional love for each of us establishes an unconditional worth that is the most profound and unsurpassable meaning of human dignity. That most fundamental meaning of human dignity is the value that God sees in each person in light of God's unconditional love.⁴²

By entering into the network of human personal relations, God shares with human beings that unconditional human dignity, which is to be lived out in appropriate institutional patterns of cooperation. God's transformation of personal relations bestows a radically new valuation of the human dignity of each human being, and also sets in motion the quest for the social, economic, political and cultural institutions that will make it concretely possible to value and to relate to one another as God values us. From this point of view, human rights are guarantees that make it possible for human beings to participate in patterns of institutional cooperation that promote this

transcendent value of human dignity. Human rights are concerned with making it possible for human beings to intelligently, creatively, and critically adapt and develop those institutional patterns for the sake of living together in God's transformed personal relations.⁴³ For example, economic rights to property, housing, food, health care have to do with the biological conditions needed for living out transformed personal relations. Civil rights of speech, assembly, press, are imperative because people need to come up with insights about how to cooperate ever better, and to communicate and perfect those ideas through mutual criticism and dialogue, for the sake of better realizing the divinized personal relations.⁴⁴

V. Personal Relations and the Civil Rights Movement

So far I have presented a very terse and very general summary of Lonergan's theological account of personal relations and their relationships to human dignity and human rights. My presentation must seem quite abstract. Yet a very concrete manifestation of what Lonergan is getting at occurred in part almost forty years ago here in Birmingham, Alabama.

In his 1963 "A Letter from a Birmingham Jail" Martin Luther King, Jr. answers the criticisms leveled at him in an open letter from eight prominent Alabama clergymen.⁴⁵ These critics accused King both of inciting violence, and of betraying his ministerial obligation to uphold moral uprightness by breaking the city's laws. King's

⁴² Technically of course God does not "see"; God's knowledge of our value is had in God's unconditional love for us.

⁴³ See Haughey, *op. cit.*, 770-73.

⁴⁴ The idea of viewing rights as "minimal conditions" for participation in social goals is certainly not; see for example Glendon, *op. cit.*, 313, and Hollenbach, *op. cit.*, 48. What is original here is the proposal that rights are to be understood as guarantees and conditions for promoting the participation in the personal relations transformed by the divine missions.

famous letter is his response. It has become a classic in moral reflection in the United States. Before turning his attention to the question of unjust laws, however, King begins his letter by answering the charge of inciting violence. There King explains the theory of nonviolent direct action that he had learned from Mohandas K. Gandhi. King explains that nonviolent direct action requires careful completion of four basic steps: assessment, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. Assessment, in King's words, is the "collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive."⁴⁶ Genuine negotiation, or at least the sincere effort to negotiate, must precede any escalation to the level of direct action. This is so because direct action itself "seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension ... [that] dramatize the issue [so] that it can no longer be ignored."⁴⁷ If these direct actions were not preceded by sincere attempts at negotiation, then they could not justifiably be called actions of the last resort, and the resulting crisis would lose its moral stature and its potential for creative resolution.

Still, it is the third step, self-purification, that is the most essential of all.⁴⁸ Without self-purification, direct action could not be nonviolent. Nor could it be the source of the sort of *creative* tension that King envisioned.

So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?"⁴⁹

⁴⁵ See <http://www.virtualology.com/virtualmuseumofhistory/hallofusa/famousamericans/martinlutherkingjr.info/mlk/>

⁴⁶ "Letter," 290.

⁴⁷ "Letter," 291.

⁴⁸ Curiously, in the first version of King's letter that I ever read, his discussion of self-purification was excised. See Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Individualism and Commitment in American Life: Readings on the themes of Habits of the Heart* (New York: Perennial Library, 1987), 306.

⁴⁹ "Letter," 291.

Effective workshops on self-purification entail much more than asking questions. They involve practices of prayer, scriptural reflection, meditation, imaginative anticipation and imitation (e.g., imitating Christ or St. Francis or Gandhi), and role-playing. These practices include rehearsing bodily behaviors and in so doing they are indispensable preparations for nonviolent demonstrations.

Self-purification is a process whereby “natural” impulses of self-protection give way to other actions. The meaning of these alternative actions is a dramatic meaning. Actors in nonviolent demonstrations deliberate about and choose to introduce these actions into the ongoing human drama of personal relations of the local culture. In Birmingham and in other nonviolent demonstrations, these were actions deliberately chosen in order to dramatically portray the injustices of racial segregation. The nonviolent protestors simply performed roles of free assembly at various institutions that white people performed day in and day out. The nonviolent protestors did so knowing that they would expose themselves to arrests and blows. In eliciting these responses, they allowed the underlying violence that enforced segregation laws to rise to the surface, and thereby they made the full reality of the dramatic pattern of distorted personal relations much more evident.

The protestors’ actions also conveyed another, far more positive dramatic meaning – a meaning that surpasses anything ordinary. Their actions in this dramatic context communicated symbolically the incarnate meanings of their own personhood – persons dedicated to something that was far more valuable than self-protection. Their nonviolent direct actions exposed latent social violence; but just as importantly, they revealed themselves as persons incarnating values of justice and even redemption.

King's remarks about the meaning of acts that come from self-purification are strikingly reminiscent of a remark that Lonergan once made. Paraphrasing historian Christopher Dawson, Lonergan remarked that "if you give people a cause, they will undergo discomfort and pain, hunger and thirst, brutality and death, and they will do it gladly."⁵⁰ Lonergan's use of the word "cause" here means "value." When people endure pain, hunger, thirst, brutality and death or accept imprisonment or blows without retaliating, they put values into play in the arena of personal relations. The acts of nonviolent demonstrators elicited powerful, sometimes even converting, responses among those who witnessed such deeds. Their nonviolent actions and the subsequent responses together modified the pre-existing network of personal relations.

African-Americans were profoundly devalued by the prevailing pattern of segregated personal relations. In a racist network of personal relations, African-Americans were assigned a value of being less than a fully valued person, although it took the Civil Rights Movement in the United States to make this fact powerfully evident to all. A network of personal relations can be violent, without this being obviously so. The nonviolent demonstrators intended to reveal both the devaluation of human beings and the underlying violence of these patterns of personal relations. Where there are such patterns of personal relations, there is no real outer peace. There is at best the illusion of peace – the peace that the world gives.

Still, we may ask, if the valuation of a person is constituted by the cultural pattern into which she or he is thrown, how is it possible for a devalued person to overcome this degradation? From whence spring the individuals who know and value themselves more

⁵⁰ "Notes on the Philosophy of History" (1933-34), p. 105; see also "Discussions transcribed by Nicholas Graham, Lonergan Workshop 1978," p. 6, in the 1st Discussion (June 12, 1978). I am grateful to Armando J. Bravo for these references.

positively? Fortunately, both the universe and human history have intrinsic, non-systematic dimensions, so that no one pattern of personal relations will be fully determinative. Alternative and counter-cultural patterns of personal relations can exist and do arise within dominant patterns. It was no accident that the Civil Rights Movement sprang primarily from the African American churches, and this has now been well documented. Humanly, these churches are patterns of personal relations that constitute a positive valuation of persons. They constitute patterns of personal relations that are counter-cultural to the prevailing racist patterns of personal relations. Yet churches are not only human organizations. African American churches are institutions that embody the fuller array divine-human personal relations.⁵¹ Like other religious organizations, at times the African American churches did this imperfectly, better at some times and locations than at others. Nevertheless, it was the real albeit often submerged evaluation of persons by God that made it possible for people to know and value themselves as God knows and values them, and the churches manifested this divine valuation. Their acceptance of God's valuation of them as persons made possible the alternative dramatic actions of civil rights demonstrators, and that made possible the dramatic (though still incomplete) transformation of personal relations in the United States.

At its deepest level, the Civil Rights Movement was an effort to effect a revolution in personal relations. King used to say that his objective was not merely the legal reform of civil rights, but the "beloved community."⁵² In Lonergan's terms, the Beloved Community refers to patterns of human interaction where God's personal relations determine how people are valued. In that community, God's personal relations

⁵¹ See *De Deo Trino: II*, Question Thirty: "Is it appropriate that the Son be sent visibly and the Spirit sent invisibly?"

inform and govern human participation in institutional cooperation at all levels. This is why King did not stop with legislation such as the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voter Rights Act (1965), but went on to demonstrate for transformations in economic institutions as well.

VI. Conclusion

The concept of human rights came out of modern political philosophy, whose relationships with Christianity is both complex and strained. What I have tried to indicate in this article is how a theological theory of personal relations can provide a foundation for human rights that is Christian at its roots. Of course this way of grounding of human rights affects the “feel” that one has about rights.

For example, in Locke’s political philosophy, rights rest upon the foundations of biological survival and individual sovereignty, and those foundations affect how people pursue and feel about their rights.⁵³ In the version I have tried to develop here, biological sovereignty is a condition for building up and perfecting the personal relations among human and divine persons. It is these personal relations, not biological survival, that animates the pursuit of rights. These personal relations between humans and God are the reasons why nonviolent activists will freely risk their biological well-being and their lives for the sake of the Beloved Community. Again, in the approach offered here, God, not the individual human, is sovereign. This, too, profoundly affects how one pursues institutions and initiatives that promote and insure rights.

⁵² See James H. Cone: *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or A Nightmare?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 63-66, 297.

⁵³ Locke, *op. cit.*, 8-9.

Again, a Kantian foundation for human rights rests upon a conception of rights stemming from an unchanging form of universal reason and from individual autonomy. In the approach presented here, reasoning involves the creative, flexible, self-correcting dynamism of human insights and intelligence *for the sake of* realizing the personal relations communicated by God. Moreover, the autonomy of human action is not radically individualized but is situated; it depends upon, draws upon, and has its impact upon those networks of institutions and personal relations.

In this article I have not tried to offer a rationale for human rights that appeals to all peoples, abstracting from all differences. I have not appealed to a lowest common denominator that every human being will agree to; post-modern criticisms have made us all wary of any such attempts. Rather, I have tried to offer a rationale for human rights that intends to speak specifically to Christians, a rationale that draws upon the very roots of Christianity, namely: the personal relations of the Triune God entering into our own interpersonal human lives. I have done so in the hope that this account may help Christians to think creatively and critically, and to act intelligently, responsibly and lovingly with regard to human rights issues. I offer this so that Christians, myself included, may have a deeper understanding rooted in our own most profound realities, and from that basis may enter into practical cooperation with others to bring about a better world.