

**Religions and Human Rights:
a Reformed and Anglican Christian approach
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Abstract

This paper or work in progress is a critique of many in my own Protestant Christian tradition who have forgotten the role of the Abrahamic traditions, including Christianity, in the development of human rights, swallowing the historical subterfuge that it is only a post-Enlightenment development. This, in large part, led to the defeat by Sydney Anglicans and Catholics of the Rudd Government's attempt a decade ago to develop an Australian Human Rights Charter under the guidance of Fr Frank Brennan. This forgets the role of the Bible, Catholic tradition, canon law, and Reformed and Evangelical approaches to human rights over the centuries, and particularly in the establishment of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 in response to the Holocaust. The paper explores the relationship between universal, creation-based supports for human rights and particular Abrahamic traditions and covenants, with help from Jewish scholars Martin Buber, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and Michael Walzer, in order to establish both a thin and thick basis for human rights. With the help of Reformed philosopher and theologian Nicholas Wolterstorff and others I argue for an intrinsic basis for human rights in humanity's being made in God's image. This carries intrinsic dignity and worth that cannot be erased or used as a mere means to an end.

1. The Bible and human rights

The infrastructure for a biblical view of human rights can be found across the range of biblical literature – law, prophets, wisdom, Gospel and epistles. In the Law in Gen 1:26-28 human beings are depicted as made 'in the image of God', uniquely representing God as an image represented a king or divinity: as male and female to each other in companionship and together in kingly dominion or responsible rule over their creaturely kin. In Genesis 4, a key part of the long Fall narrative from Genesis 3-11, we observe what Rabbi David Novak calls 'the first rights conflict in the Bible...: the conflict between Cain and Abel ... that led to the first murder. There an original appeal is made to God to enforce a human right ... to have one's murder avenged'. God holds Cain accountable for his brother Abel's murder: 'What have you done? Your brother's blood is crying ... to me from the ground' (Gen 4:10)'. Given that humans 'are like us, knowing good and evil' (Gen 3:22) [perhaps unlike animals], and are hence responsible to God for violations of rights of one like God, 'An assault on any other human being is taken to be an assault on God himself. Note too 'that Cain was still angry with God for having rejected his sacrifice (Gen 4:4-7)... Killing his brother Abel, who was favored by God, might well have been his attempt to take revenge on God'.¹

¹ David Novak, 'God and Human Rights in a Secular Society: A Biblical-Talmudic Perspective', in *Does Human Rights Need God?*, eds Elizabeth M. Bucar and Barbara Barnett (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 51-52.

Similarly, Christopher J.H. Wright's pamphlet² is based on a rights-bearing triangle of relationships in Genesis 4 between God, humans and the earth from where 'Abel's blood cries to me [God] from the ground'. Further, in Exodus 3:9, God hears Israel's anguished cry from its enslaved, right-less state in Egypt. Finally, in the New Testament, God's Holy Spirit's, humanity's and creation's cries for right relationship are in concert (Romans 8:18-27). This theological and ecological thread raises interesting contemporary questions. Has creation got rights or needs or both? Is the Bible less completely anthropocentric in its view of rights and needs than commonly thought, given, for instance, that the triangle of relationships in Matthew 6:26ff. sees, in a lesser to greater argument, that dime-a-dozen sparrows' needs (and rights?) are met by God, but we humans are worth more than hundreds of sparrows?

If creation is voiceless, is it a non-noisy neighbour or brother in a Franciscan Brother Sun, Sister Moon sense? Or is its voice heard and even 'personhood' recognised through the Holy Spirit's cries? This has significant Christian and religious potential concerning rights against river pollution, species extinction or catastrophic Climate Change.³

Later in the Law, in Genesis 18:25, Abraham's bold questioning of God's indiscriminate injustice to the notoriously evil Sodom as 'judge of all the earth' reinforces this triangle of justice: 'Shall not the God of all the earth do what is just/right?' Further, in Exodus 23:9, Israel's similar experience as sojourners and slaves in Egypt is compared to what their sojourners or resident-aliens are experiencing and should empathise with. This human likeness across racial/national boundaries leads to the universal right to 'one justice for the sojourner and for the native-born' (Lev 24:22). As Rabbi Novak boldly says, 'Neither justice nor the God of justice died in Egypt, or even in Auschwitz'. Further, the Catholic scholar Walter J. Harrelson recognises that the Decalogue in Exodus 20 is Israel's, and indirectly creation's, charter of rights and freedoms.⁴

A similar pattern is seen in proverbial wisdom based on creation ethics: 'Speak out for those who cannot speak, for the rights of all destitute' (Prov 31:8). This commonly used pro-life slogan, while appropriate for abortees and vulnerable women, is applicable to all the destitute. So, as creation cries out against injustice, so we are to cry out for the needy of all the earth. This also links with the deserved punishment of Sodom for

² Christopher J. H. Wright, *Human Rights: A Study in Biblical Themes* (Bramcote, UK: Grove Books, 1979). A similar, longer and more Anabaptist approach is by New Zealander Christopher D. Marshall, *Crowned with Glory and Honor: Human Rights in the Biblical Tradition* (Telford PA: Pandora Press, 2001).

³ 'In ... a week, the world has gained three notable new legal persons: the Whanganui River in New Zealand, and the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers in India. In New Zealand, the government passed legislation that recognised the Whanganui River catchment as a legal person [cf. a corporation in law]. This significant legal reform emerged from the longstanding Treaty of Waitangi negotiations [in which the pioneer of Christianity in New Zealand Rev'd Samuel Marsden played a prominent role] is a way of formally acknowledging the special relationship local Māori have with the river. In India, the Uttarakhand high court ruled that the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers have the same legal rights as a person, in response to the urgent need to reduce pollution in two rivers considered sacred in the Hindu religion.' In Erin O'Donnell and Julia Talbot-Jones, 'Three rivers are now legally people – but that's just the start of looking after them', theconversation.com, 24th March 2017.

⁴ Walter J. Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (London: SCM, 1997).

violating 'the basic human rights' of the stranger and poor in particular. In Proverbs 17:5 'the one who reviles the poor despises his Maker', given that the poor are made in God's image. Renowned Evangelical pastor Rick Warren notes this link nicely in his challenge to his own tribe: 'if we as Evangelicals remain silent and do not speak up in defence of the poor, we lose our credibility and our rights to witness about God's love for the world'.⁵ And renowned Evangelical Anglican theologian N.T. Wright adds an explicit New Testament and Christocentric note that applies to human rights and concern for the poor in mitigating evil as 'part of putting the world to rights under Jesus' just and gentle rule'.⁶

Even in the more Israel-focused prophetic genre we find in Amos 1-2 the concept that nations, like Tyre, are judged by a general covenantal 'treaty of brotherhood' (Amos 1:9) or the equivalent of a 'Geneva War Convention'. But further, Israel is more judged by failing to live up to its particular covenantal revelation and redemption, reinforcing or recapitulating the general covenant revelation: 'Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel, says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Arameans from Kir?' (Amos 9:7). Israel will be judged severely but not totally, according to Amos 9:8.

Several Jewish scholars have shed light on this relationship between universally based covenantal right and rights on the one hand and particular covenantal right and rights on the other. Eminent political theorist Michael Walzer notes the wide recognition of the 1968 Prague Spring's street protests for justice, human rights and freedoms from the Soviet Union with more intricate debates about the nature of human rights. At this point, using language from the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, we start general and thin in our language and add particular philosophical or theological thickening over time.⁷

In some ways similarly to Walzer, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks states that each Abrahamic religion starts with the general covenant with creation – i.e. Eden, the Noachide covenant and Natural Law as an original, then adapted (to fallen humanity), basis for human rights. Each builds a particular covenant on it – the Jews' revelation to Moses at Sinai, Christians' new covenant in Jesus' blood at Calvary and Muslims' revelation to Muhammed at Mecca.⁸

In the apostolic speeches and epistles we see how the apostle Paul in Acts 17:16-34 connects with Gentiles via the creation covenant with God 'in whom we live and move and have our being'. Paul then corrects, possibly being judged like Socrates for bringing new gods to corrupt Athenian youth, before the Court of the Areopagus in Athens. The apostle displays the antiquity and universality and knowability of the Creator God, above all idols, beyond all 'unknown god' statues through the revelation of the resurrected Jesus who will judge all upon his return. Facing a mixed group of seekers and sceptics, Paul simply seeks a second hearing or dialogue which he gets from some, including one judge.

Human rights language as lingua franca?

⁵ 'Evangelicals Embrace New Global Priorities', beliefnet.com/news, June 2005

⁶ N.T. Wright, *Evil and The Justice of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 90.

⁷ Michael Walzer, *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press: 1994).

⁸ Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference* (Oxford: Bloomsbury, 2002).

Given the universal underpinning provided by the biblical language of creation for human rights, it is surprising and lamentable that many Evangelical Protestants shy away from this language, apparently unable to look past its partial post-Enlightenment sources and applications. This often entails their self-silencing like wall-flowers fleeing the conversational and dialogical dance of the lingua franca of many people of good conscience and fellow co-belligerents seeking the common good.

Such isolating reactions may be due partly to inflated expectations and claims of some post-Enlightenment advocates of human rights as a potential Ethical Esperanto. However, like its alleged analogue, Esperanto uses the Latin alphabet, and draws primarily from Romantic and Germanic, i.e. European, languages. Its founder Zamenhof suggested Italian as a model for its pronunciation. Alleged non-European aspects are accidental. So human rights language is not innately global but European based with, I'd argue, a primarily Abrahamic religious genesis and structure. And some objections from Majority World leaders and thinkers to its European individualism may be sometimes right, though there is a temptation to use such a strategy to cover up their abuses against democratic and human rights activists from their own cultures. Ironically, one of our Muslim representatives in our seminar, Salih Yucel, accuses western human rights advocates of being too corporately-focused in practising sin-by-association or tarring all Muslims or certain national/racial groups with the same brush as the 9/11 or other terrorists.

Perhaps then a better frame for seeing human rights language is not as absolutely universal but primarily Judeo-Christian-based and expanding, making explicit what may be implicit in other cultures and codes. It is perhaps more like Pidgin, a simplified sample of accessible moral language, which is not just Pidgin English but applicable to many languages. Besides the often minimalistic, necessary but not sufficient deontological language of rights, the balancing language of virtue/character and telos/purpose/consequence is also necessary to flesh out and thicken the more skeletal and thinner language of rights.

2. Judeo-Christian philosophical development and pedigree of rights language

Yale philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff's 2008 book *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* lays out a strong case for the intrinsic nature of human rights.⁹ Wolterstorff affirms the Jewish refugee philosopher Hannah Arendt's call in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* for 'a right to have rights'.¹⁰ This unconditional, minimal condition of human society is to ground and account for the reality of human rights and for the 'deep structure of the moral order'. Wolterstorff finds this grounding in human rights as inherent worth (to God).

⁹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), vii-ix, reflects on how he was motivated to write the book after his experience, in various fora in universities and Reformed churches in the late 1970s, of hearing young victims of South Africa's distorted Dutch Reformed apartheid system voicing righteous anger at their daily indignities and patronising charity. This led to a call 'to speak up for the wronged of the world. ... Hearing the voices and seeing the faces [cf Levinas] of the wronged ... evoked in me a passion for justice'. He also mentions Palestinians facing the force of Israel, driving him to become chair of the Palestinian Human Rights Campaign, and the influence of the divinely derived dignity of his poor farmer immigrant parents in Minnesota (vii-ix).

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich [1951] 1973), Ch. 9.

I. Inherent worth to God as the ground of human rights

'The recognition of human beings as having natural rights', by virtue of the worth they all possess on account of bearing the image of God and being loved by God, and that we are all equal in that fundamental way, goes back into the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. 'Human beings, all of them, are irreducibly precious.' In this, Wolterstorff finds the 'Missing Link'/Ground of Secular Morality (see Ch. 15). 'Most moral systems don't take the worth of persons seriously', but, like Utilitarianism, start with how worthwhile their lives are. Utilitarianism's founder Jeremy Bentham (c.1788), dismissed rights as nonsense on stilts¹¹ – as not scientifically measurable or legally enforceable unlike his happiness sums. Bentham's approach, influential at the time of the founding of White Australia in the late 18th century, has maintained a strong foothold on much Australian moral theory and social policy. It is now expressed through Peter Singer's rational, pleasure- and altruistically-inclined, but more subtle preference form of utilitarianism.¹² There is still a strong secular human rights tradition also. But as Wolterstorff quotes appreciatively from the major secular Australian philosophical rival to Singer, Rai Gaita:

*The secular philosophical tradition speaks of inalienable rights, inalienable dignity, and of persons as ends in themselves. These are, I believe, ways of whistling in the dark, ways of trying to make secure to reason what reason cannot finally underwrite.*¹³

To Gaita, we are fooling ourselves if we think we have a sufficient secular rational basis for the sacredness of humanity and, implicitly, of human rights. Nor is he convinced by philosophical or theological justifications of sacredness. Such sacredness 'derives from the unashamedly anthropomorphic ... claim that we are sacred because God loves us, his children'. Wolterstorff agrees with Gaita, stating that 'it is impossible to develop a secular account of human dignity adequate for grounding human rights'.¹⁴

II. Counteracting philosophers and Christians against human rights

It is tempting for some, along with utilitarians like Jeremy Bentham or postmodern pragmatists like Richard Rorty who rubbish modern 'rights foundationalism' and our 'moral subculture of rights', to dismiss natural or divinely derived dignity as being built on the sand of 'sad and sentimental stories' evoking 'sympathy for the [other's] feelings'.¹⁵ But it's way too thin for Wolterstorff. He knows that Nietzschean nihilism isn't enough; an 'account of human dignity adequate for grounding rights' is required.

¹¹ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 4.

¹² For a critique of Singer's preference utilitarianism and its diminishment of human rights in favour of animal rights and mere preferences or means to the end of pleasure, see *Rethinking Peter Singer: A Christian Critique*, ed. Gordon Preece (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), especially Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2.

¹³ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 324 n.2, citing Raimond Gaita, *Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (London: Routledge, 2000), 5.

¹⁴ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 325.

¹⁵ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 320, citing Rorty's 'Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality' in *On Human Rights*, eds Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley (New York: Basic Books, 1993).

And there is a credible theistic grounding for such rights available, if Christians only knew their theological history. Human rights arise from radical, irreducible respect of innate human worth. And this innate human worth is grounded in a theistic account: in a nutshell, the 'relational property of being loved by God'.¹⁶ This has nothing to do with human capacities as in the coin analogy for what God's image is. Instead, it is God's relationship to us, like the image of the moon on the water – an alien dignity, in God's loving eyes, no matter how alienated we feel, is what gives humans great worth and grounds human rights.

In Part I: 'The Archaeology of Rights', Wolterstorff goes on to out-narrate and out-dig the influential conservative Christian 'story of decline' into Enlightenment-based human rights. This story assumes that the ancient and early medieval view of right order through divine law and virtue is more fundamental than natural rights language (e.g, in the US Bill of Rights). Wolterstorff concedes rightly that much rights talk is 'silly', and there's too much slippage between inherent human rights and secular, property-based 'possessive individualism' (C.B. McPherson).¹⁷ But he argues that Brian Tierney's *Idea of Natural Rights* shows that 12th century Catholic canon lawyers, in no way possessive individualists, were already employing the idea of natural rights. The common narrative about the idea of natural rights originating in the late Medieval Nominalist and Enlightenment philosophers proposed by Joan Lockwood O'Donovan is only able to demonstrate an historical association, not a compelling logical or psychological connection, with possessive individualism.¹⁸

Wolterstorff thus finds that the decline narrative is 'upside down' and misses the recognition of inherent human rights in the Church Fathers, Christian Scriptures and Hebrew Bible. 'Moral victims, persons who have been wronged,' are ever-present in our biblical inheritance, as are solicitude for the vulnerable, proclamations that God loves justice and 'holds human beings accountable for doing justice', and recognition of the underlying 'worth of persons and human beings' (Gen 1:26-8, Ps 8, 139, Micah 6:8, Isa 1, 61, 65, Amos 1-2).

III. Evangelicalism and Enlightenment rights

It is timely to return to my quarrel with many of my own tribe who ignore or downplay human rights language, except when it's the right to freedom of religion, conscience, voice etc. This Christian view that the human rights tradition is tarnished by its modern enlightenment origins, as Stanley Hauerwas argues in his animus against U.S. liberalism,¹⁹ is short-sighted historically, as Wolterstorff and Tierney demonstrated above. Further, theologians as different as Hauerwas' hero the Anabaptist J.H. Yoder, and Evangelical Anglican Oliver O'Donovan, while critiquing contemporary liberalism, agree against Hauerwas that early modern Enlightenment liberalism has Christian roots in persecuted minorities and congregational elections and the desire for freedom of

¹⁶ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 352.

¹⁷ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 3-4, 6-7, 11.

¹⁸ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 54, 52.

¹⁹ See *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University Press, 2001), Ch.4: 'The Church and Liberal Democracy: The Moral Limits of a Secular Polity'.

religion, conscience and voice, fostering democratic freedoms and rights.²⁰ And Baptist pastor Roger Williams was the most consistent in extending these rights beyond his own to the indigenous tribes of 17th century Rhode Island, as the liberal Jew Martha Nussbaum²¹ and great Old Testament scholar Mark Brett²² both recognise.

Again, Evangelicals often don't know their own history well enough. It takes a Muslim convert in Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali to see an emerging 'Evangelical-Enlightenment consensus' on human rights as leading, in part, to the anti-slavery campaign. Further, David Bebbington's *Evangelicalism in Britain* shows how Evangelicalism has an Enlightenment universal concern and activism (which can stress human rights).²³ For John Wesley and William Wilberforce. While both were more conservative than modern liberals, for them spiritual and physical freedom and human dignity were interwoven,²⁴ as in the great Wedgwood China cry of the black slave: 'Am I not a man and a brother?'

IV. Evangelical and ecumenical roots of international human rights

Further, another step towards an international human rights framework was the British and American anti-slavery campaigns that led to bilateral treaties from 1817 to 1871 and to the first international human rights courts for slavery's suppression. Conservative Evangelical and secular views of the secular origins of human rights also miss the fact of conservative Evangelical and Catholic (especially Pius XII's annunciation of universal human rights in 1937) and other global missionary and ecumenical influences having a key role in placing human rights at the forefront of the post-WWII international order in the form of the UDHR.

More recently Samuel Moyn shows how the personalist 'tri-faith'²⁵ of the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish faiths, based on all persons bearing the image of God, and its defence of human dignity a decade before World War II, was virtually equated with human rights as in the United Nations Charter of 1945. It correlated human rights and dignity: '[T]o reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person ...'.²⁶

This was not merely academic philosophy but had a political edge as a middle way for conservatives to uphold freedom and dignity between the horror of the Nazi Holocaust and the development of the Cold War. It was a European 'Golden Age' for Christianity,

²⁰ P. Travis Kroeker, 'Why O'Donovan's Christendom is not Constantinian and Yoder's Voluntarism is not Hobbesian: A Debate in Theological Politics Re-defined', *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 20 (2000), 41-64.

²¹ Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America's Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

²² Mark Brett, '"Sovereignty is a spiritual notion": An unexplored frontier in the freedom of religion debate', abc.net.au/religion, 30th May 2019.

²³ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989).

²⁴ Brian Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag: Protestant Missions the British Empire in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 56-61, 70-74.

²⁵ Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 150.

²⁶ Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*, frontispiece.

especially among dominant and increasingly confident and vocal Christian Democrats. They separated out human rights from the secularism of the French Revolution and 'reinvented them to impose moral constraints on individuals, support conservative family structures, and preserve existing social hierarchies'.²⁷

V. Some evangelical qualifications regarding rights

After the above conservative rationale for human rights, we can enlist Sydney Anglican theologian Andrew Cameron bearing an olive branch of some nuance against a minimalist approach for our morality and polity based purely on horizontally framed human rights. But he seeks, too, a way towards co-operative action.

Despite 'medieval Christendom's powerful momentum to human rights thinking', our conception gets impoverished when rights are divorced from God's 'community-sustaining abundance'. We can work with others, 'while not changing our religious identity'. But we need safeguards of freedom of religion to enable such common civil action without state interference. '[I]f God's prodigal, communal abundance' is built-in to our natural and social ecology, 'then it is there for all'.²⁸

For Cameron, and for me, there is 'no Christian monopoly on ... community sustaining abundance and the equity of precious humanity'. When it is part of who we are as God's images, it is no surprise when others see abundance and humanity too and label them 'human rights'. We can work with and be co-belligerents with them, despite having different presuppositions as to why we have rights.²⁹

Conclusion

In seeking to negotiate a path between 'Secular Rights Desperation or Triumphalism', Cameron rightly reminds us that 'without an awareness of God's gracious abundance', or Rev. Dr Martin Luther King's long 'arc of the moral universe that bends towards justice', as our source of dignity, 'secular human rights-motivated action begins to feel like a desperate rearguard action by the lonely few against monstrous and overwhelming evils'.³⁰

Similarly, for Wolterstorff, our 'moral subculture of rights' may be pervasive, but it is also 'frail'. If secularisation is irresistible, then how confident can we be in the future for justice and human rights? This is a 'melancholy conclusion, ... if one believes the secularization thesis ... I do not'.³¹ And neither do the wide range of post-secularisation theorists like Peter Berger, Jurgen Habermas and Charles Taylor.³² Religion continues to

²⁷ Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*, inside front cover.

²⁸ Andrew Cameron, in *Another Way to Love: Christian Social Reform and Global Poverty*, eds Tim Costello and Rod Yule (East Brunswick: Acorn, 2009), 51.

²⁹ Francis Schaeffer, *Pollution and Death of Man* (Leicester: IVP, 1970), appendix.

³⁰ Cf. *Does Human Rights Need God?*, eds. Bucar and Barnett.

³¹ Wolterstorff, *Justice*, 393.

³² Cf. Peter L. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Belknap Press, 2007); and Judith Butler, Jurgen Habermas, Charles Taylor and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, eds Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

be on the rise world-wide,³³ and so, by elective affinity or family likeness, should be human and creational rights over time.

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³³ John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge, *God is Back: How the Global Revival of Faith is Changing the World* (New York and London: Penguin, 2009). For an alternative view supporting continued secularisation worldwide see Steve Bruce, *Secularization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).