

How Christianity has shaped human rights for the better – Roger Trigg

- 1) The Council of Europe has seen human rights in opposition to religion rather than underwritten by it. It has said: ‘States must require religious leaders to take an unambiguous stand in favour of the precedence of human rights...over any religious principle.’ This opposition created between religion and rights is at odds with the assertion in the American Declaration of Independence that ‘all men are created equal’ and ‘are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights’.
- 2) The difference lies between the early Enlightenment (exemplified by John Locke), grounding natural rights in a theistic view of morality and reason, and the later French Enlightenment which was more atheistic, reacting against the tradition and authoritarianism of the ancient regime and the Roman Catholic Church. Even so, it is hard to understand ‘*liberte, egalite, fraternite*’ without a Christian context. Europe has always ‘recognised’ that people have fundamental rights and freedoms as human beings, rather than as members of states. In the words of an Italian philosopher, and politician, (Marcello Pera), this is ‘the secular homage that Europe pays to the Christian tradition’, but he now sees an ‘obvious intent to erase the Christian history of Europe.’ Similarly Jurgen Habermas sees ‘egalitarian universalism’, from which sprang ideas of human rights and democracy as being the ‘direct heir of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love.’
- 3) The result is a dispute between a view of Christianity as the justification of our most basic beliefs about humans, and the idea of it as a oppressive force from which the public square has to be cleared to allow freedom to flourish.
- 4) What is the rational basis for a belief in human rights? They must depend on more than that ‘we’ happen to believe them, or even that they are crucial for democracy. (Why is democracy important – because it respects human rights.) Why do humans uniquely

matter? The U.N. Declaration of Human Rights says: ‘Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inviolable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’.

- 5) Why do humans have ‘inherent’ dignity? One philosopher (James Griffin) stresses that dignity lies in our ‘capacity to choose and to pursue our conception of a worthwhile life’. It resides in capacities (cf. Kant’s stress on rationality). Thus choice, consent and autonomy are central. Yet this cuts out many humans, (e.g. the senile), and ‘persons’ replace humans’, in a way that may make some appear expendable.
- 6) The idea of ‘human rights’ implies that all humans matter, in an objectively true manner. You cannot be a relativist about morality and believe in human rights. If the concept needs theism, that may itself be an argument for theism.
- 7) A Christian view of the issue comes from the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff. He claims that ‘being loved by God gives a human being great worth.’, and that ‘natural human rights are what respect for that worth requires.’ He worries that if our Judaic and Christian heritage of a belief in our equal and great worth erodes, then ‘we must expect that our moral subculture of rights will also eventually erode.’ Why, after all, should we bother about other people, particularly if they cannot affect us? Human rights should not challenge religious belief. They can be undermined if Christian belief is lost. Christianity does not just shape human rights. It grounds them and justifies them.
- 8) The right to freedom of religious belief and practice is a central element of human rights. Allowing it to be overridden, is to attack a source, perhaps *the* source of a belief in human rights, If we are not free to adopt a religious belief, and religious institutions such as churches are not given some protection to teach their beliefs, our commitment to human rights is then at risk There may be no hierarchy of rights (though in the U.S. many see religious freedom as the ‘first freedom’), but freedom of religion is a precious part of being human.

9) That right to freedom of religion has been explicitly advocated for the last four hundred years by Christians (such as the early Baptists Thomas Helwys in London and Roger Williams in New England), and then by the Anglican, John Locke, who influenced the American Founders such as Thomas Jefferson. They stressed how all should be able to choose their own religion, as we are answerable for that choice before God. It is important to see such a right as protecting more than private belief but also public manifestations of religion, beyond just freedom of worship. There is always a balance, too, between the exaltation of individual conscience and the need to recognise objective truth. We cannot each be in a Church of one person. We need both freedom and reason. A God-given reason can help us listen to others and cooperate with them. Freedom without reason is dangerous. Reason without freedom is impotent.

See also Roger Trigg- *Equality, Freedom and Religion* (Oxford University Press paperback, 2013),

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