

THE AMBIGUITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE POLITICS OF GOD

This essay draws together questions inherent in the contemporary concept of human rights and the dynamics of Christian hope. There can be no doubt that the contemporary conceptions of human rights and their articulations in international law have been for the last sixty plus years an important source of hope for the powerless, the marginalized, the disenfranchised, for all victims of oppression, discrimination and abuse. The language of human rights has so modified the global political dialectic between domination and resistance to it that today legal human rights instruments abound. For the first time in history, a global ethical discourse has been initiated that claims to be able to restrain the politics of oppression and repression. It promises all victims of discrimination the dignity and freedoms enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Right (UDHR). Yet, the notion of human rights is not a freestanding value. Collectively held, it is subject to innumerable global forces of a socio-cultural, political, and economic nature that render its standing ambiguous, even casting a shadow over its future.

Our world experiences a ‘crisis of instability’ that has been in the making for over a century. Destabilizing elements have been variously described in the literature as population growth, resources scarcity, the changing nature of war, international terrorism, forces of globalization, climate change, environmental despoliation, growing right-wing nationalism, the decline of the nation state, the role of global capital, and more. While each is dangerous enough in its own right, it is their confluence and interrelatedness that poses the greater threat of potentially triggering huge escalations of interhuman violence against which, I argue, human rights are no defense. As recent history shows, irrespective of human rights killing humans has already reached the level of mass production. By the end of the Cold War over 130 million people had been killed, 50 million in combat, 80 million murdered in cold blood as fanatical leaders coercively strove to implements their

ideologies.¹

Certainly, the era of human rights was born in the aftermath of World War II out of the experience of violence and inhumanity. Countless publications have celebrated this achievement. And when, in 1945, the nations embraced the UDHR as an expression of their moral and behavioral aspirations, it seemed to promise a better world. Soon, a plethora of U.N. agencies, several human rights courts and tribunals emerged, together with over one thousand non-government organizations (NGOs) which monitor the implementation of a worldwide human rights regime. In addition, the principles of the UDHR have been progressively incorporated in most national constitutions so that at this stage the notion of 'human rights' counts among the central features of modern society and international legal practice.

Yet, when assessed fifty years after inception by the former U.N. Human Rights Commissioner Mary Robinson, the scorecard of this impressive edifice looked far less glamorous than its first hope. Mary Robinson writes:

Count up the results of 50 years of human rights mechanisms, 30 years of multi-billion-dollar development programs and endless high-level rhetoric and the general impact is quite underwhelming ... this is a failure of implementation on a scale that shames us all.²

Mary Robinson's words are even more relevant today than when she first wrote them, twenty-five years ago. On the surface, five factors may be cited to explain the fragility of the human rights framework.

- Ethical and political pluralism made it almost impossible for the nations to agree on universal norms, let alone on their enforcement.
- Economic globalization did not lead to a moral global consensus as expected, only to further political fragmentation as national cultures and communities tried to protect their integrity and interests.
- The atrocities committed since the days of the Holocaust cast doubt on the

¹ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *Out of Control: Global Turmoil on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993).

² Mary Robinson, the former UN Commissioner for Human Rights, cited in Geoffrey Robertson's *Crimes Against Humanity* (Allen Lane: Penguin Press, 1999), 32. Since this quotation comes from her speech at the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the UDHR, it lends special poignancy to her lament.

effectiveness of the human rights regime.

- The moral vacuum in which current conflicts escape resolution in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen (and the refugees they generate).
- The international weapons trade perpetuates human rights abuses and subverts the human rights system. This lucrative business renders seller nations reluctant to confront their clients, usually nations that perpetrate abuses.

These elements, serious enough individually, when taken together they keep challenging the world's faith in the promises of the UDHR, its Conventions and institutions. And while widespread HR violations have certainly reinforced the need for human rights and their promotion, their defense has faced much resistance:

- Opposition from political and/or religious ideologies.
- From uncertainty of how and when to justify international interventions in cases of flagrant internal repression and violations.
- From philosophical or religious traditions that cannot accommodate the humanistic value of "rights."
- From state players reluctant to emphasize human rights for fear of U.N. interference with their sovereignty.

Further threats loom daily from poverty, infectious diseases, climate change, environmental degradation, proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, violence within states, from the drug and narcotics trade, from international terrorism, and more. Each of these contradicts the values enshrined in the UDHR: human dignity, liberty, and fraternal solidarity. To counter these threats, many nations place their hope in international cooperation. Certainly, over the years notable achievements along these lines have been reached, yet the possibility of small conflicts deteriorating into large-scale outbreaks of violence is an ever-present peril easily mooting the prospect of international cooperation. For the ideal of universal human rights offers little or no political quid pro quo when self-preservation is at stake.

There are other factors of a more philosophical kind that endanger the human rights

project: the post-modernist suspicion of meta-narratives, the politics of difference and identity, and unresolved questions of universality in the context of cultural relativism. Observers like Max Stackhouse have noted that “concern for universal human rights occurs only when the social system is informed by a specific creed and successfully maintained by an effectively organized constituency”.³ If this insight is valid as I suspect it is, such an observation points to the highly contingent nature of the human rights project from inception. Yet, this may not be its greatest danger. This arises from what may be called “the politics of concealment”, that is, from “acts of mystification of how human suffering is produced.”⁴ Upendra Baxi insightfully notes that any spectacle of human suffering produced by the mass media must “divest itself of any structural understanding of the production of suffering itself ... [for] the community of gaze can only be instantly constructed by the erasure of the slightest awareness of [their] complicity.”⁵ This insight is most significant. If to create a global community of objective onlookers it is necessary to erase “any awareness of complicity,” then no one can be held accountable for contributing to human suffering, and the human rights project will have been ingested by the system of dominance whose abuses called for it in the first place.

Despite this ambiguity, human rights instruments constitute appeals to public virtue, which are necessary, if only for their symbolic potential to speak with the clarity of conviction against the “brutal clarity [that] characterizes regimes of political cruelty”.⁶ In this light, the ambiguity of human rights is further amplified by two questions: how to maintain the integrity of human rights if their future depends on an ever-resilient commitment to uphold freedom? And how to protect human rights language from degenerating into the political rhetoric of manipulation?

Further deterioration occurs when the concreteness of human suffering fails to be addressed. In the ears of the suffering, the phrase ‘human rights’ sounds like an abstraction, while the anguish of their plight is dehumanized when it is reduced to a vague generalization called ‘rights violations’.⁷ The most significant weakening of the

³ Max Stackhouse, *Creed, Society and Human Rights: A Study in Three Cultures* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 31.

⁴ Upendra Baxi, *The Future of Human Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), ix.

⁵ Baxi, *Future*, 86 n. 27.

⁶ Baxi, *Future*, 4-5.

⁷ Baxi, *Future*, 17-18.

human rights system occurs when it fails to stand outside the dominance system whose sociality is built on victimage in one form or another. For every negotiated compromise with a sociality that does not respond to the needs of those who suffer most within it, simply perpetuates abuses. Yet, compromises and collaboration are unavoidable methods in the promotion of human rights.

These along with many other factors constitute the ambiguous nature of the human rights system. What renders its future application contingent is its currency as a developing system of legal and moral values. As such it functions as a kind of “cultural software” that may be re-written, a complex process which takes place at many levels.⁸ At the level of the U.N., for instance, the formulation of human rights norms is the outcome of a vast array of interactions between “international diplomatic and civil service desires in an ever expanding U.N. system.”⁹ What further contributes to the ambiguous nature of human rights is that diverse foreign and economic policy pressures seek legitimacy from the language of human rights. As a welcome guise, it provides opportunities for the free play of power, although human rights norms were intended to curb it. Where, however, the rule of law, in the guise of human rights language, combines with the reign of oppression, the moral authority of the human rights ideal is lost.

What is more, in the multi-dimensional world of human rights and its highly competitive culture where hundreds of proponents struggle for recognition, human rights rhetoric is passionately partisan. But “conflicts of rights beget conflicted NGOs ... [who pursue] their versions of social and global redefinitions of the content and scope of human rights,”¹⁰ such that all participants imitate each other, as they present diverse (and competing) paths to a better human future.

If human rights ideals are being undermined in this way at present, we are not dealing with a novel phenomenon. After all, they have suffered subversion from inception as the nations concealed their violations of the agreed human rights agenda. In the aftermath of the Cold War, this ambiguity was thrown into even starker relief. During the ensuing ideological re-alignment, the non-aligned nations created their own “soft”

⁸ Baxi, *Future*, 12.

⁹ Baxi, *Future*, 9.

¹⁰ Baxi, *Future*, 44.

version of human rights to justify the abuses they had committed during the struggle for world dominance between the superpowers. In a parallel move, the Third World nations deployed an identical stratagem by labelling their violations “nation building.”¹¹

This prioritizing of state power is still the prime obstacle that prevents the oppressed and violated from having a real voice. It is also the reason why justice and reparations are denied to them. But such a “politics of concealment” always fail to acknowledge its victims and their innocence, just as it interprets history from the viewpoint of the winner, who is also always the violator of others.

While it is certainly true that the politics of human rights seek to take human victimage seriously, it is equally true that while the politics of concealment dominate, the ambiguity of human rights will not vanish. This is further exemplified by two seemingly counter-current trends, each bearing in its own way upon the interpretation and application of human rights in the future: the declining influence of the West and the growing influence of global capital. A brief word, then, on each of these.

The Declining Influence of the West

The human rights paradigm is a product of Western civilization. There is considerable historical evidence that such fundamental values as human dignity, equality, neighborly welfare and brotherly solidarity are deeply rooted in Judeo-Christian tradition. Without such values, Western civilization is inconceivable.¹² Stackhouse sees in human rights “a world-wide rhetoric and legal agenda” that is “most deeply grounded in a highly refined critical appreciation of Biblical traditions.”¹³ While it is beyond the scope of this essay to review Christianity’s cultural influence on the formation of the North-Atlantic civilization that had provided the social, moral and institutional womb out of which the human rights project was born soon after the end of World War II, Christianity’s significant contribution to that project cannot be questioned. It represented the culmination of the Puritan/Liberal attempt to fuse Christian spiritual aspirations and

¹¹ Baxi, *Future*, 36, also n. 26.

¹² See also Roger Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God* (London: SCM Press, 2004).

¹³ Max Stackhouse, “A Christian Perspective on Human Rights”, *Society* January/February 2004: 23-28, p. 25-26.

political realism into one institutional innovation. During the twentieth century, the rise of the ecumenical Christian movement in Europe and the USA played a critical role as well, especially during the drafting stages of the UDHR and contributed significantly to the emerging global order centered on the U.N. and its human rights agenda.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the churches were late to recognize the importance of articulating human rights. Their hesitancy was in part justified, for when human autonomy is asserted to the point where the meaning of human rights is uncoupled from the biblical vision and from all reference to the transcendent order, difficulties inevitably arise.

In recent years, the influence of the West in promoting human rights has been declining. According to Huntington, this decline follows a more general pattern in intercivilizational politics which has been in the making for almost a century. The “expansion of the West” was followed by “revolt against the West”. Although Western influence on non-Western societies continues, non-Western societies are increasingly asserting their own history and influence in world politics, particularly since the Cold War.¹⁵

The West, through the political ideologies it produced in the twentieth century, shaped not only the political landscape of the world but also the nature of the “universal” state.¹⁶ As empires gave way to democracies, the West substantially reconfigured the dominance system. But if there was an expectation among the Western nations that the end of the Cold War would usher in the “democratic revolution” and with it the uninhibited spread of Western style democracies and of human rights, it did not materialize. Rather, non-Western nations were resistant to pressure from the West to embrace democracy. The strongest resistance came from Asian and Islamic states. Both asserted the value of their religious and cultural roots and sought to give their growing (economic) independence from the West more positive expression.

By the turn of the millennium, the influence of the West, which had dominated the world when the UDHR was first drafted, was disappearing. This changed distribution of political power reduced Western influence, especially in Asia.¹⁷ Western pressure to bring human

¹⁴ John S. Nurser, *For All Peoples and All Nations: The Ecumenical Church and Human Rights*, Foreword by David Little (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 200

¹⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (London; New York: Touchstone Books, 1998 [1997]), 50-53, 192-96. The “West” means two geo-political entities, the nation states of Europe and North America.

¹⁶ Huntington, *Clash*, 192-96.

¹⁷ Huntington, *Clash*, 193-94.

rights standards to bear, for instance, on the conduct of the military government of Myanmar (former Burma) was resisted as meddling in national sovereignty.¹⁸ Significantly, too, Japan withdrew its support from American human rights pressures on China after the Tiananmen Square massacre with the remark that they would not let “abstract notions of human rights” get in the way of their relations with China. Huntington writes, “Western efforts to promote human rights in U.N. agencies generally came to naught. With few exceptions . . . human rights resolutions were almost always defeated in U.N. votes.”¹⁹

The assumption that all elected governments are *ipso facto* pro-Western and pro-human rights is false. In fact, the democratic criterion has turned out to be a double-edged sword for the West. Democratically elected governments in non-Western societies are more likely to be anti-Western and not necessarily supportive of human rights practice in the Western mold. According to Huntington, this waning influence of the West is in no small measure due to Western “moral decline, cultural suicide, and political disunity”²⁰ – so that its manner of coping with this inner crisis will determine the future of its influence on other societies – with unquestionable consequences for the future of human rights.

The Subversive Power of Global Capital

No doubt, globalization greatly influences the politics of the human rights culture. Under the banner of an inevitable and desirable globalization, all manner of transnational entities from multi-national financial institutions and corporations to transnational NGOs exert increasing influence on human rights. In this context, the nation state is beginning to lose its regulative power not only over the transnational flow of capital, but also over certain human rights responsibilities assigned to it by the UDHR. With international financial arrangements (World Bank and IMF), the state no longer fully controls the necessary domestic distributive functions

The role of the nation state is further diminished by the pressure of international capital to ‘deregulate’ the domestic economy and remove itself more and more from the role of regulator of goods and services. At the same time, global capital seeks to secure a

¹⁸ In 1990, Sweden submitted a resolution on behalf of twenty Western nations condemning the junta, but opposition from Asia “killed it” (Huntington, *Clash*, 195).

¹⁹ Huntington, *Clash*, 194-5.

²⁰ Huntington, *ibid.*

regulative regime that protects its global interests by putting pressure on the state. Consequently, the state becomes increasingly disengaged from its constituency. As its dependence on international political and financial networks increases, its distributive role at home diminishes. In other words, the qualities of the new state that is emerging may be gauged no longer by its political commitment to a just social order, but by the performance of the state within the framework of globalization.²¹ One consequence is that many NGOs have sought partnerships with transnational financial institutions such as the World Bank and are thereby co-opted into advancing the interests of global capital to the detriment of local needs.²² This involvement tends to undermine both the power and the legitimacy of Third World governments, while jeopardizing locally financed social welfare efforts.

The influence of this trend on human rights is profound. Not only does it play into the hands of global capital by untying it from the international human rights code, it also fosters an asymmetrical partnership between transnational corporations and nation states so that such powerful corporations are able to shape domestic policy for their own benefit.

If this trend is disturbing, it must be remembered that it is the “natural” outworking of the liberal logic of the UDHR flowing from the right to property “alone as well as in association with others of which no one may be arbitrarily deprived” [Article 17, UDHR].²³ The scope of this property right protects business corporations and shareholders under existing human rights law, both at the national and international level. Consequently, the institutions of global capital may even claim human rights protection in pursuit of their international free market agenda.

That the U.N. not only fully subscribes to globalization but actively encourages it was evident from a speech by the Secretary General in January 1999 when he proposed at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, a “Global Compact” between the U.N. and the world business community. This Compact was to “enable all the world's people to share the benefits of globalization and embedding the global market in values and practices that are fundamental to meeting socio-economic needs”.²⁴ By proposing a

²¹ Baxi, *Future*, 136-38.

²² As Kim & Gottdiener have noted, in commenting on World Bank projects designed to assist the urban poor, these projects showed a high degree of “irrelevancy ... and often foster the interests of global capital” (Kim & Gottdiener, “Urban Problems”, 189).

²³ Baxi, *Future*, 144.

²⁴ The Office, United Nations Secretary-General, “Global Compact” (accessed 12 February 2004);

partnership with global capital, the U.N. negates the possibility of calling one of the chief perpetrators of human rights violations to account, if not voiding the meaning of Art. 30 of the UDHR altogether; it reads:

Nothing in this declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any acts aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

As a result of this move, the ideologies of economic progress and globalization have become enshrined in U.N. policy, creating a situation that will continue to produce states favoring the interests of global capital and so undermine the UDHR. In short, the paradigm of human rights has become internally conflicted as the realities of globalization are potentially creating fresh communities of misfortune through the logic of social and economic exclusion.

Must we then conclude that the human rights project is futile, that there is no escape from the politics of cruelty, and that our striving in the pursuit of “good” within the present course of history is wasted? I shall address this question at the end of the essay out of a context that shall occupy us in the next section, where I shall set aside the “politics of human rights” and turn to the “politics of Jesus”, that is, to God’s presence in history, for the “kingdom of God”, so central to Jesus’ teaching, is not without political significance.

THE POLITICS OF JESUS

The Political Meaning of the Kingdom

At the center of the Christ-drama, played out in the life, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, stood the proclamation of God’s reign. In Jesus’ mind, this reality was both present and future, an “event [as well as] a sphere of existence”.²⁵ Yet more important from the dramatic viewpoint is the revelatory character of the kingdom and its political meaning in history. This kingdom reveals who God is as the creator, ruler, sustainer and redeemer of his entire creation. It also reveals that God is on the side of

available from http://www.un.org/news/ocsg/sg/pages/sg_office.html

²⁵ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 618.

the victim and stands opposed to human oppression, injustice and exploitation.

In proclaiming God's reign, Jesus, who embodied this kingdom, invited all humanity into the privilege and responsibility of acknowledging its rule. Through faith in him, human beings are offered adoption into divine sonship (Jn 1:14). The resurrection of the Crucified validates his claim as the "Lord of all." While, the new gathering of God's people began at Pentecost following their scattering after Jesus' death, it continues in history as the Spirit of Christ empowers the new community in its witness to the reality of the kingdom. But the new community is not identical with the kingdom, nor is it its consummation, far from it. Nonetheless, it is through this community's and its testimony, that God summons all humanity to embrace the way of Christ in anticipation of God's universal rule.

The summons to enter this kingdom has social and political dimensions. By being conformed to the self-giving love of Christ, his followers are called to renounce allegiance to the dominance system that cannot but produce victims. While this step involves human participation, collaborating in the cause of the kingdom lies beyond human capability alone. It is given as 'gift of God' who is acting in history.

This call echoes that ancient summons which first came to the people of Israel. Through the voice of Moses, God summoned a dispossessed people who suffered under Egypt's domination into freedom and responsibility. In their exodus from the slavery of Egypt, this people were brought into a radically bilateral covenant relationship with the God of their liberation;²⁶ and so came to acknowledge the divine will and their role within it. This awareness found expression in their communal practices designed to preserve their new-found freedom, in dignity and solidarity. Thus, within this action of God in history, the first basis of human rights thinking was established.

The Social Vision of Ancient Israel

When King Josiah, under the military and cultural pressure of Assyria, sought to reform

²⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1997). Brueggemann writes, "The assertion that the relationship of God and Israel is so radically bilateral as to make God a genuine party to the interaction is a step Christian theology characteristically resists. It is a step, however, that Jewish thought can entertain" p. 30 n.8.

Israel's society in the 7th century BC, he turned to Israel's ancient social vision. Israel's theology cannot be separated from its founding experience. Its central values were rooted in a tradition that reached back to the Exodus. Their laws projected a new social order which, in their understanding, Yahweh had inaugurated. Since they owed their freedom to Yahweh's liberating action and not to a self-initiated revolt against a repressive regime, only a thoroughly theological interpretation could account for Israel's existence and sociality.

According to Deuteronomy scholar Georg Braulik, Israel's vision of society had from the start been pregnant with the triadic notion of "liberty, equality and brotherly solidarity".²⁷ To begin with, Yahweh liberates Israel from slavery in Egypt and grants Israel new social space in the Promised Land. Through this act, Yahweh becomes their "new master" which cancels Egypt's lordship and with it all other human lordship over his people.²⁸ Any consequent "human rights" were therefore not rooted in human nature or human ingenuity but were inherent in Yahweh's unique historical action – all at once love-gift and inheritance.²⁹

By liberating Israel, God founded an equitable alternative social structure of community in contrast with Egypt's oppressive social order. Israel's tribal society conceived of itself as a politico-theological entity based on God's justice (*ts^edâqâh*). Israel was to preserve the freedom Yahweh had granted by "doing justice." Since the Decalogue (Ten Commandments) originated directly from Yahweh's saving activity, its laws must be understood not as the "sum of a universal human ethos," but as "thematized elementary demands" that must be met in order to preserve the liberty which these instructions presuppose. Ethical conduct would emanate not from the imposition of legal obligation but would flow directly from faith in Yahweh who had freely intervened for the sake of Israel's liberation. Not to acknowledge the liberating will of God would be to forfeit freedom and to return to slavery.³⁰

Moreover, this liberating action of Yahweh is not aimed at isolated individuals but forms

²⁷ Georg Braulik, O.S.B., "Das Deuteronomium und die Menschenrechte" in *Studien zur Theologie des Deuteronomiums* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1988), 301-23. ET Georg Braulik O.S.B., "Deuteronomy and Human Rights," trans. Ulrika Lindbad, in *Theology of Deuteronomy: Collected Essays by Georg Braulik*, vol. 2, BIBAL Collected Essays (N. Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1994), 131-64.

²⁸ In the original, this act "bewirkt die Aufhebung menschlicher Herrschaft", p. 306.

²⁹ Braulik, "Das Deuteronomium", 305-307; ET 135-136.

³⁰ Braulik, "Das Deuteronomium", 305; ET, 135.

a people. This people of God had as its inheritance Yahweh's promise to their forefathers as the "we" and "us" of the Deuteronomic credo make plain.³¹ Its very formulation is constitutive of their solidarity. It also enunciates the justice that was to govern and sustain their life as a people, provided they kept their social order according to Yahweh's benevolent will. Furthermore, in order to achieve equality and counteract societal stratification, Israel was instructed to participate at Yahweh's feasts in a manner that eschewed status and privilege. Since all were equally important to Yahweh, all members were invited – men, women, children, slaves,³² Levites (who did not enjoy residential rights in rural towns), the underprivileged, strangers, orphans and widows. All were to enjoy equality by jointly celebrating their relationship with Yahweh. The liturgical forms of worship inspired and nourished a society of equals.³³

Lastly, Yahweh's gifts of liberty, equality and participation were inseparable: when Torah emphasizes one, the other two are taken to be in full view. The experience of being the one people of God is implicit in the freedom and equality they had received. Indeed, this relational emphasis constitutes the necessary basis for the interpretation of Israel's history. As with its freedom, this ideal of solidarity was a product of the Exodus or, more specifically, of the non-hierarchical tribal society that ensued from this founding event.

³¹ The passage reads, "We were slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, and the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand; and the LORD showed signs and wonders before our eyes, great and severe, against Egypt, Pharaoh, and all his household. Then He brought us out from there, that He might bring us in, to give us the land of which He swore to our fathers. And the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always, that He might preserve us alive, as at this day. Then it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the LORD our God, as He has commanded us" (Deut 6:21-25).

³² Braulik, "Das Deuteronomium", 309-10; ET 136-138. From a human rights perspective, the provision for "servants" is noted. While the most basic meaning of the Hebr. *ebed* is "slave" or bonded servant, it would be misleading to suppose that it carried the same irksome overtones of the modern meaning. On the one hand slavery signified employer/employee relationships in general; on the other, slavery in Israel functioned as a social safety net that protected impoverished families from destitution and allowed them to survive. Slaves were not without rights. For instance, fellow Israelites could not be bonded indefinitely. They were to serve six years and then go free (Deut 15:12-15). This is to say that the Deuteronomic tradition was not exploitative. Rather, it humanized the then universal institution of slavery from the standpoint of "brotherhood". Because even slaves were brothers, the title "master" was avoided. A slave never sold his person, only his ability to work.

³³ Braulik, "Das Deuteronomium", 318-19; ET 136-146. If their new "social space" offered freedom of movement, the Sabbath even guaranteed "free time". Under Yahweh, Israel's right to leisure (which in ancient society only the wealthy were privileged to enjoy) was available to all. Moreover, the sabbatical work prohibition was directed at the original community of work, the agricultural household. It included husband, wife, children, servants, and the animals associated with the work process and represented a revolutionary creation of faith in Yahweh. It stood not only as a symbol of their freedom but above all as an expression of obedient trust.

Put together, this makes the “human-rights-thinking” of the Old Testament (O.T.) unique.³⁴ It revolves around an “Other-constituted” sociality in which consequent human rights were *to be granted to others* for the preservation of the freedom secured through Yahweh’s liberating action on Israel’s behalf. If Israel reflected a social order that recognized such concerns, this was not because these notions were derived from natural law thinking, but from the outworking in history of God’s freedom-granting activity which had brought about social justice. In short, Israel’s tradition is inexplicable without its claim regarding its: the original and abiding relationship with Yahweh. At the same time, the history of Israel dramatically exemplifies a condition in which the realization of liberty and community involves a struggle against an oppressive regime by responding to, and collaborating with, the liberating will of God.

There is another side, however. The large body of law in the O.T. projects the fundamental assumption that obedience is possible and that an obedient people can build a community whose future and well-being is shaped by its responsibility towards this community and its covenantal obligations. Yet, the O.T. testifies in many places to Israel’s frequent disobedience and the experience of disaster that followed.³⁵ Birch notes, “[They were] deeply inclined to disloyalty that they were not finally able to control their own future or create the order the law suggested they can. Both law and liturgy will be ongoing witnesses against their ability to do so.”³⁶

A contemporary parallel might be drawn in respect of the contemporary human rights era. After World War II, the world held high hopes for a new beginning. Certainly, the pathos and high-sounding ideals of the UDHR gave voice to the expectation that from a world-in-ruins a new order might emerge. Yet within fifty years the nations exhibited such a profound infidelity to their own human rights ideals and covenants that the large body of human rights law now testifies to the infidelity of this generation, subverting the confidence in the ability of the nations to bring about the order they thought they were able to create. If the Biblical story of Israel’s early history casts a shadow over our ability to shape the future on our own terms, then only to open blind eyes to

³⁴ While one cannot prove a direct influence of Deuteronomy on modern human rights formulations, the parallels of Braulik’s analysis are certainly most striking. See also Braulik’s attempt to correlate the content of the UDHR Article by Article with the stipulations of Deuteronomy (pp. 301 -302; ET, 131 -132).

³⁵ Birch, *et al.*, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 169-71.

³⁶ Birch, *et al.*, *ibid.*, 169-70.

humanity's solidarity in sin and covenantal infidelity.

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At the same time, the story of Israel and the drama of Jesus show that God's action in history sets people free from the way things are. The new path to liberation, as it opened, calls for new ways of acting. To the extent that this means engaging the world and the powers that shape it, such action may be called "political." Yet, this way, because of its dependence on the call of God, differs radically from the politics of the world. In the O.T., this difference was rooted in the story of the Exodus; in the New Testament (N.T.) it is grounded in the Easter-event. The social structures of enmity and domination are subverted, and the politics of rivalistic opposition are called radically into question, while in the new community it calls into existence there emerges a new social meaning.

Predictably, difficulties arise when we attempt to translate this new reality into concrete political action. An essential part of the problem is the way the image of Jesus is reduced to an abstractly "religious" figure. A depoliticized Gospel has no political or economic bite. Recent scholarship continues to give a fresh focus in this regard with "political" consequences for the Christian way of life.³⁷ Such considerations are not absent in the dramatic view I have adopted. This approach tends to favor a political rather than merely "religious" Jesus, which is not to say that the political nature of Jesus' actions needs to be fully developed. It is enough to understand something of the highly politicized context in which Jesus proclaimed the kingdom of God.

To illustrate this point, a brief look at Jesus' political response to the oppressive forces that ruled Palestine in his day must suffice. The understanding of Jesus in the early church cannot be properly understood except by relating his command to love enemies to the context of the power structures that determined the social reality at the time of his ministry.³⁸ Indeed, John H. Yoder has contended for an even more political reading

³⁷ Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); *The Message of the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002); *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence: Popular Jewish Resistance in Roman Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd Edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

³⁸ Luise Schottroff, "Gewaltverzicht und Feindesliebe in der Urchristlichen Gemeinde, Mt 5:37-48; Lk

when he wrote that the total moral witness of the N.T. is political in nature.³⁹

The Politics of Jesus

Life in Galilee at the time of Jesus was conditioned by Roman occupation. Horsley writes, “In the decades before Jesus was born, Roman armies marched through the area, burning villages, enslaving the able-bodied, killing the infirm.”⁴⁰ First Herod, and later his son, Antipas, ruled the land with an iron fist as puppet kings under the Romans, while governors appointed and deposed at will the high priests from the Jerusalem élite who ruled the religious life of the nation from their power-base, the Temple.

The subjugation of conquered people was for Rome a national security measure. Any sign of weakness on Rome’s part was considered “an invitation to disaster”. Mass-slaughter, enslavement, and massacres were standard military procedures, terrorizing and even annihilating whole populations. Consequently, every town and village was affected, including such places as Nazareth, so as to leave “mass trauma ... in its wake”.⁴¹

Jesus’ mission and movement must be understood against this background. The proclamation that “the kingdom of God is at hand” assumes an all-the-more significant political meaning. How did Jesus respond?

If Jesus spearheaded a “prophetic program of God’s judgment against the imperial order in order to advance the renewal of the people of Israel,” as suggested by Richard Horsley, its first targets were Rome’s client rulers, the high priesthood and the Temple apparatus.⁴² He delivered God’s judgment in a series of speeches, healings, exorcisms, and condemnations of the Temple, its high priests and the scribes. With Horsley, Jesus’ entire ministry “vibrates with Israelite prophetic tradition” as he communicates in word and deed a prophetic disapproval of the ruling élites together with their

6:27-36”, in *Jesus Christ in Historie und Theologie: FS Hans Conzelmann*, ed. Georg Stecker (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1975), 197-221.

³⁹ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, vii.

⁴⁰ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 15.

⁴¹ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 27-30.

⁴² Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 86-104.

oppressive and exploitative practices.⁴³

Jesus was equally outspoken in his attitude to Caesar. While church tradition has usually interpreted Jesus' famous response to the question to whom it is lawful to pay taxes, God or Caesar (Mark 12:17 and parallels) in a manner that simply asserted the primacy of a spiritual kingdom, rather than as a rejection of Caesar's claim, it must be seen as an "accommodationist Christian projection." Because God was their exclusive ruler, Jesus' listeners, including the Pharisees, would have understood it otherwise.⁴⁴

In his exorcisms too, Jesus implicated Roman imperialism. From a contextual survey of Jesus' practice, Horsley argues that these exorcisms meant symbolically the expulsion of Roman rule, as demons were identified as legions. Only our distance from the text prevents us from seeing these connections. The same is to be said for episodes such as the crossing of the sea and the feedings in the wilderness. Ancestral memory would tend to identify Jesus as a prophet in the lineage of Moses and Elijah who withstood intolerable imperial powers and renewed the people of Israel.⁴⁵ In respect we may conclude that in Jesus' view, the Roman imperial order stood under the judgment of God's imminent kingdom, and he launched a mission of social renewal among a subject peoples in anticipation of victory.⁴⁶ Jesus was not waiting for God's supernatural intervention to bring Rome to its knees. Even though the imperial order was still firmly in place, he inaugurated a program of healing the debilitating effects of imperial oppression. He restored people's lives and communities based on the principles of equality and cooperation that were deeply lodged in Israel's covenantal heritage.

Contemporary Western culture can only marvel at this community-building emphasis that stands in sharp contrast to its own individualistic focus. Jesus did not urge the people to leave their homes and time-honored social customs in order to follow him into a radical alternative lifestyle. Instead, the Gospels show Jesus' ministry as firmly embedded in a communal context: four friends bring another through the roof into the

⁴³ This stance provokes the resolve of the Temple establishment to destroy Jesus. It highlights the fundamental conflict of the kingdom with an oppressive system, into which must not be read a conflict between Judaism and Christianity [*ibid.*, 93].

⁴⁴ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 98. Notice that already in the Exodus tradition there was clear reference that God's action canceled not just Egypt's but all other peoples' dominion over God's people.

⁴⁵ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 99.

⁴⁶ Horsley, *Jesus and Empire*, 105.

house to be healed; we see blind beggars, anguished parents, grieving sisters, and demoniacs, the players in this drama are always surrounded by the community, as Jesus heals not just common human ills as the communal and relational devastation that had resulted from Roman imperialism, restoring social relations in their own social contexts. For example, his exorcisms expose and expel the demonic influence of the occupying forces. That he heals the social body is indicated by such figures as the hemorrhaging woman and a twelve-year-old girl, who symbolize Israel. He instills hope by blessing those who mourn, by making the lame walk and the blind see, by preaching good news to the poor, by removing the paralyzing sense of self-accusation derived from the belief that the people were punished for the sins of their forebears. To counteract social disintegration of village life, Jesus works to renew the covenant community, redirecting his hearers to such values as family, marriage, the forgiveness of mutual debts, solidarity in mutual assistance. In all this, he is acting as the agent of God's will.

Jesus' political and economic stance resonated deeply within the common memory of the people and may be called "prophetic,"⁴⁷ demonstrating in action the tangible nearness of the kingdom. God's deliverance was on the way. But if people were to receive it as an ongoing experience, they had to return to divinely established priorities as a prerequisite for deliverance from rivalries awakened by social and economic differences and from their sense of moral failure. Even if outward circumstances were not going to change immediately, through his palpable symbolism healing had begun at the level of their personal and communal attitudes. Thus, Jesus initiated a social revolution among the people against the armed violence and oppressive imperialism they suffered.

However, such a perspective on the activity of Jesus does not permit a triumphalist reading for the social ethic, so visible in Jesus' conduct, presupposes a deep commitment to self-renunciation. After all, the history of salvation and liberation has always been marked by suffering.⁴⁸ Every stance that demonstrates the presence of

⁴⁷ Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation* [Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989], 61-99, especially 68-80. Tinder defines the 'prophetic stance' not simply as a critique of oppression, but as one that also recognizes the impossibility of a just society. While this inequality is partly due to the needs of society, the main cause lies in the unequal capacities of human beings to contribute to society. Even if one holds to the principle of equality and the infinite value and dignity of the individual, justice demands that this inequality must not be ignored.

⁴⁸ Johann Baptist Metz, "Erlösung und Emanzipation", in *Erlösung und Emanzipation: Quaestiones*

relational “rightness” entails the risk of suffering and death as it exposes the hidden “wrongness” of the human dominance system and its violence. Concealed in its folds, often in the guise of religion, we find politics that cannot but oppress.

As it is, to maintain the prophetic stance in history will always require that individuals as parts of the community conform themselves to the “politics of the kingdom.” Their task is to unveil its victimizing effects in the teeth of all hegemonic claims; as it witnesses to the will of God, this stance is non-negotiable. Renouncing both violence and any accommodation to the “politics of expulsion,” it reveals the character of God as vulnerable love even for the enemy. And in renouncing all forms of oppressive dominion, this stance acts vicariously on behalf of those who are victims of that violence and expulsion.

Properly understood, such a commitment to non-violence is not the passive resignation of a subservient morality, but the deliberate refusal to justify violence, as Schottroff notes: “The ‘yes’ to non-violence is only credible within the context of the praxis of resistance as a combative and missionary means for the salvation of all.”⁴⁹ Even if called “combative,” this stance is neither a hostile reaction nor the frustrated response of the weak lashing out against the powerful. Rather, it embodies the pacific commitment to confront the power structures that set the stage and determine the way things are.

Non-Violence Explained

Walter Wink sees the world-structuring forces (St Paul’s “principalities and powers”) as a system. It emerged some 5000 years ago and whose mythology has permeated Western culture. It still exerts massive influence today as it is repeated in countless forms through the media, through literature, drama and popular entertainment.⁵⁰ Its plot hails from ancient combat myths that established and maintained order by means of violence. In the Christian conception, it was the Easter-event—the death and resurrection of Jesus—that unmasked the underlying violence of that system.

Disputatae 61, eds. Karl Rahner and Heinrich Schlier. Theologische Redaktion Herbert Vorgrimler (Freiburg; Basel; Wien: Herder, 1973), 121-40.

⁴⁹ Schottroff, “Gewaltverzicht und Feindesliebe”, 221.

⁵⁰ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* 1-42; Also, Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 1-62.

Since God's redemptive answer to humanity's entrapment in systems of violence has not changed, we still await its full expression in history. This hope for redemption derives from God's promises, from the way God has acted in history, and from the fact that creation is not complete. Through Christ, God has redefined the divine image that undermines the idolatrous projections of both politics and religion. God's absolute renunciation of violence and threat is an effective answer to human violence, and the God who is revealed as vulnerable, in unconditional love for all, including those who reject him, can inspire the construction of a world of non-rivalistic relationships. Individuals and communities that participate in this kind of self-giving love enter the creative task of healing and transforming the world in accord with a new kind of politics. This task involves more than being non-violent resister who does not injure or crush and humiliate his opponent. Rather, its aim is to convert the opponents and instill a new understanding in their values so that they too will wholeheartedly participate in the new politics out of a higher insight that does not seek to impose solutions but develop them in a peaceful settlement within a mutually trustful relationship.⁵¹

Implementing this ideal of non-violent resistance is costly: it demands first the renunciation of the right to self-defense. It may also serve analogously for God's non-violent "politics" toward sinful and hostile humanity. God's aim is not to overpower or harm his creature. Instead, he seeks their full restoration to a mutually satisfying relation involving the conversion toward non-violence. He loves them unconditionally before they love him. Through the self-giving mission of Jesus and the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit he draws them into his life, not imposing "solutions" against their will, but transforming their desires. They now participate in the divine nature (2 Pet.1:4) and willingly implement their regenerated desires according to God's character, who restores their self-respect and moral integrity. This non-violent "politics of God" was perfectly demonstrated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is entirely possible that the non-violent stance and lack of self-defense may invite an even greater display of violence from an aggressor as he projects his own violent propensities onto his guileless opponent. But it is also possible that the patience and

⁵¹ Richard Gregg, *The Power of Non-Violence*, 2nd revised ed. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 51 cited in Murphy and Ellis, p. 137-8.

conciliatory attitude of this victim will evoke in the aggressor new desires and an anticipation of unimagined possibilities. This would bring into being the possibility of a new imitation: one based on the model of Jesus, the Crucified, or by this instance of the non-violent “politics of God.” Only a God, whose self-giving love will absorb in his own person the violence of his creature, can break the cycle of human retaliation and violence.

Liberty, Community, and Power

A more nuanced understanding of the foregoing may be gained when we consider the three notions of liberty, community and power. In contemporary society, the rhetoric of liberty is not without ambiguity. Popularly understood as the power to pursue one’s own goals for one’s own purposes, however, is inadequate. A more nuanced view must include the positive freedom of self-determination as well as the negative freedom of refraining from certain courses of action. While the former constitutes an integral part of human dignity, the latter ensues from the complicated social fact that other individuals also exercise the right to their freedom of choice and action. We must therefore recognize some limits on the scope of individual liberty, but not on the value of liberty itself.⁵²

But there is more. A Christian perspective of freedom must also consider humanity’s captivity to sin and evil and the effects that faith brings in the liberating work of God. As a result, Christian freedom is not simply reducible to humanistic-political forms of self-expression which are part of the problem in the first place. Hence, this indeterminate freedom is not an “indisputable good” in the Christian understanding of liberty. Rather, it gives rise to a moral dilemma for Christians and thus for the church. In acknowledging the value of free self-determination as integral to human dignity, they consent to the possibility of a world that structures itself in a secular manner, “unformed and ungoverned by faith.” Although consenting to secularism runs counter to their convictions, Christians must, by acknowledging liberty, also uphold the right of the world to reject faith.⁵³ No wonder that the more secularity progresses, the more it gives rise to the repudiation of transcendence and of transcendent values that are at

⁵² Cf. K. Rahner and H. Vorgrimler, *Concise Theological Dictionary* (London: Herder, Burns & Oates, 1965), 178-79.

⁵³ Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: An Interpretation* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 101-149.

the heart of Christian tradition. While the world's desires converge on what is visible and pleasurable, on what is attainable through outward control and human power, this dilemma of Christian acquiescence to secularity is unresolvable.⁵⁴ But secularity and freedom bring also special dangers for the affirmation of liberty leads to the affirmation of the primary secular institution, the state.

Here, we touch on the problem which we discussed at length in the first part of this essay, the system of domination and its victimizing effects. Functionally speaking, the state cannot be understood apart from it. Although the first responsibility of the state is the resistance of evil, it has shown itself throughout history as one of the chief perpetrators of violence and in recent years, as the very embodiment of evil. However, this is not the only reason for the Christian suspicion of the ambivalent character of liberty. By consenting to liberty, the door is not only opened to secularization, but to the necessity of living in the world that emerges and to consent to the logic of its understanding of freedom.⁵⁵ For example, Christians must consent to laws built on the secular determination of human rights, and thereby align themselves with its secularizing influences. In short, the notions of liberty, freedom and the articulation of human rights present a considerable dilemma for those committed to Christian faith.

Likewise, the notion of community presents its problems. The two predominant models of community are the "organic interdependence model" and the "justice model." Yet, both these fall short. The first assumes that community exists as an organism in which individual members cooperate as they do in a healthy body. Despite the presumed interdependence of members, this model tends to depersonalize individuals by emphasizing their functionality. The Christian tradition contains such a conception (1 Cor. 12 & 14). Here Paul speaks of the inner structure of the church in terms of the organic model as he lists several functions and gifts of its members for the ruling, administration and building up of the body. Yet Paul himself goes further when he points to *agape* as "a more excellent way" (1 Cor. 12:31), for without *love* the functional model of community is seriously deficient.⁵⁶

As regards the "justice model" of community, Tinder notes that it too fails for similar

⁵⁴ Tinder, *Political Meaning*, 102-3.

⁵⁵ Tinder, *Political Meaning*, 103.

⁵⁶ Tinder, *Political Meaning*, 118.

reasons. It devalues the individual through impartiality. While society must strive to remove injustices, justice cannot be equated with community. *Agape*-love must look beyond justice if “compromising our consciousness” of the ontological and moral ultimacy of the individual human being is to be avoided.⁵⁷

How then is community to be defined if both these models are inadequate – because *agape* refuses to treat persons only according to their social function or as depersonalized recipients of an abstract justice?

As we saw in “the politics of Jesus”, he demonstrated that covenantal love demanded more than an abstract humanitarianism. He confronted human neediness at several different levels, including the physical, the communal, and the spiritual. By exhorting his hearers to “seek first the kingdom of God” (Matt. 6:33), he made it clear that there are needs that transcend the mundane if human beings are to live fully. A central consideration is the need for meaning and truth, for as John’s Gospel has it, “the truth will set you free” (Jn 8:32). After all, the will of God and truth are identical, because Jesus understood truth in reference to God as well as to living according to the divine will in a covenantal relationship.

If the incarnation is God’s dialogical act *par excellence*, God seeking out and befriend his erring and idolatrous creature becomes coherent also as the framework of God’s presence to the world, which for love’s sake cannot permit any form of coercion. Christian realism, in its awareness of the power of evil and the structures of violence, does not expect the present world-order simply to morph of its own accord into a realm of peace and the absence of all conflict. Acquisitive desire will always produce a degree of social disorder that makes corrective action necessary on the part of the social institutions whose mandate it is to exercise legitimate power, lest society collapse in a welter of conflictive desires and injustices.

Within the Christian community, the debate about the use of force in maintaining the civil order has a long history. Two complementary views may be discerned. On the one hand, “the sword” is legitimate only because God accommodates sin. Therefore, its use does conflict with Christian discipleship. On the other, “the sword,” while

⁵⁷ Tinder, *Political Meaning*, 119.

representing an expression of sinfulness, is divinely ordained for the sake of justice. Its use does not conflict with Christian discipleship.⁵⁸ In any case, social realism, Christian or otherwise, accepts that violent forms of evil must be resisted even with force if civilized life in an unfinished world is to be possible.

Even though the legitimate use of power in some situations is necessary, there is a place for a certain kind of Christian skepticism and reserve. Tom Frame writes, “Knowing the time and the place in which the “sword” can or ought to be drawn will continue to determine whether its use will bring humanity nearer to heaven or to hell.”⁵⁹

Because evil makes necessary the use of force, radical pacifism is not an option for the state without opening the door to the greater evil of anarchy. While granting the impracticality of radical pacifism on the part of the state, the extent of its use of power provokes enormous questions given the capacities the state possesses for “collateral damage” in the age of weapons of mass destruction.

Although the occasional and controlled use of force by the state may be unavoidable, prophetic voices must be heard. These speak from a deep commitment to another possibility: the church as a worshipping community witnesses to the action of God in history in order that repressive institutions may be converted to a sociality that acknowledges the transcendent dignity of each person as it hopes for the fulfilment of human history in God.⁶⁰ This vision and hope shapes Christian political thinking, including its discernment of the uses of power. Tinder offers a valuable summary:

Christians look on power from the vantage point of *agape*. Power degrades individuals, however provisionally and benevolently; *agape* exalts them. It is true that *agape* often needs power to attain its purposes, but this implies simply that within history pure *agape* is not possible. *Agape* and power have to be combined, and the greatest political leaders are those who can respond to this tragic necessity, using power as circumstances require but subordinating it to love.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Nigel Goring Wright, *Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann*, A Radical Baptist perspective on Church, Society and State, Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), 170.

⁵⁹ Tom Frame, *Living by the Sword? The Ethics of Armed Intervention* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2004), 243.

⁶⁰ For an exposition of appropriate practices see John Howard Yoder, *Body Politics: Five Practices of Community before the watching World* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 1992).

⁶¹ Tinder, *Political Meaning*, 135.

In other words, there is no possibility of an overarching political theory or systematic comprehension of how Christian love and the use of power are compatible. How all this works out in practice can be resolved only in concrete political situations. But the recognition of this tension is necessary in the constitution of any community that seeks to cherish the values of truth and freedom. Problems are inescapable for power is terrible. As Jacques Ellul has argued at length, in the name of power rational persuasion deteriorates into propaganda that values calculable political outcomes higher than the freedom of individuals to pursue the truth in freedom.⁶²

Since the New Testament does not present a one-dimensional attitude to power, the community of Christ lives in an uneasy relationship with the state.⁶³ On the one hand, the church cannot do without it to keep order in society. It must leave the responsibility for wielding the sword in the hands of the state, where it functions as the symbol of our sinfulness (Rom. 13:1-7). On the other, it must renounce the possibility of furthering its mission by means of the state. By the same token, the church is also called to political engagement by taking a critical-prophetic stance *vis-à-vis* the power structures of the world. Therefore, it must keep its prophetic distance, without resorting to the voice of doctrinaire certainty. It must speak and act from a place of brokenness, knowing that its own ideals cannot be achieved in history except “occasionally and fragmentarily.”⁶⁴ Yet, as the bearer and steward of God’s promise of future fulfillment, it must always speak in hope in the One who sustains the church in the midst of these tensions, while both church and world are on the way to the consummation of God’s purpose.

As it progresses through history, despite its many failures to be faithful to its calling, the church is nonetheless God’s “primary vehicle for mirroring the divine image.”⁶⁵ In an unfinished and divided world, this pilgrim-community is called to serve as a prophetic sign through its surrender to the grace of God above all. Drawing its life from the primordial community of the Trinity, it expresses before the “principalities and powers” the character and wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10), through its community and

⁶² Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985); *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

⁶³ See Walter E. Pilgrim, *Uneasy Neighbors: Church and State in the New Testament*, Overtures to Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999).

⁶⁴ Tinder, *Political Meaning*, 139.

⁶⁵ Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 637.

kenotic service.

In this prophetic engagement with the world, the church also reveals the truth of Christian convictions. This truth resides, according to Hauerwas, in the power of the Christian story to “form and sustain a community sufficient to acknowledge the divided character of the world.”⁶⁶ In other words, the existence of this pilgrim-community in the world is evidence for the truth-value of its claims. The church is, therefore, not a contingent social phenomenon in the divine economy; rather, it constitutes a reality that is “other” than the world precisely because the drama of God has formed it. While it does not insist on the falsity of all other positions, the church witnesses to a reality that cannot be ignored and the faith built on it (Eph. 2:20) flows from the self-revelation of the one, true God. Far from requiring withdrawal into a ghetto, the church is called into active engagement with the world. Because this engagement has a prophetic edge, the church acts in a particular manner:

[W]hile still God’s good creation, [the world] is the realm that knows not God and is thus characterized by the fears that constantly fuel the fires of violence. We live in a mad existence where some people kill other people for abstract and unworthy entities called nations. The church’s first task is not to make the nation-state system work, but rather to remind us that the nation—especially as we know it today—is not an ontological necessity for human living. The church, as an international society, is a sign that God, not nations, rules this world.⁶⁷

This calling of the church to be a sign is inherent in the proclamation of the kingdom of God, which constitutes the most far-reaching political claim. The universal scope of the reign of God relativizes every other form of rule, whether these derive from claims of the state, of cultural tradition and social custom, or of any other form of exercising authority in the world, including claims to authority stemming from the system of human rights. The Word of God as the word of liberation from death and from the fear of death calls all such claims to account.

There is a certain danger for the church to deploy human rights language uncritically. When the church speaks with the vocabulary of human rights it seems to undermine its own cause simply by endorsing the liberal presupposition of the human rights

⁶⁶ Stanley Hauerwas, “The Church in a Divided World: The Interpretive Power of the Christian Story”, *Journal of Christian Ethics* 8, no. 1 (1980), 55-82.

⁶⁷ Hauerwas, “The Church in a Divided World”, 75.

agenda which sees the human person as an autonomous individual over and against others (including God) and whose independent moral standard is taken to transcend all cultural and religious differences.

Although the church often fails at the prophetic task through concessions to expediency, including complicity with violence, it cannot limit God's action in the world. Through the activity of the Holy Spirit, God may nurture a "remnant," which in turn may become the source of renewal of the church's conviction that it must take the narrow path.

Human Rights or Call to Pro-Existence?

Both Israel's social vision and the politics of Jesus have resonances in the modern articulation of human rights. However, the paradigm of human rights cannot be related in an unqualified manner to the kind of existence to which Jesus summons his followers. Ever since the Easter-event, new hopes have become possible for the entire human race as well as for the entire cosmos through the vivifying presence of the risen Jesus and the indwelling Spirit. When the vast potentialities for healing and wholeness inherent in this event begin to take hold of the imagination, life-giving possibilities of personal and communal transformation occur within human history, as the Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch concedes in his monumental work, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*.⁶⁸

In the New Testament, the creative reach of hope is nowhere more radically articulated than in the Sermon on the Mount. In this paradigmatic utterance, Jesus sharpens our understanding of the inadequacy of former conventions, thereby pointing to the possibility that human desire may be transformed in its hungering and thirsting for true justice. This righteousness names covetousness as idolatry (Luke 12:15; Col. 3:5), unchaste looks as adultery (Mt 5:27-28), and anger as deserving judgment like murder (Matt. 5:21-22). Jesus makes plain that God's liberating grace summons his followers to renounce the demands of the old order and to live an authentically human existence based on a social ethic rooted in the imitation of him, whose life was given for all. In this regard, his "pro-existence" distinguishes "following Jesus" from the paradigm of human rights. Three aspects stand out. In the drama of salvation, Jesus offers himself as the sufferer for

⁶⁸ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, American Edition. Studies in Contemporary German Social Thought (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

all. In his Passion, he stands in the place of all who are oppressed, who are bereft of dignity and fundamental rights. Afflicted as he was by state and religious powers, he is at once most human in suffering the loss of dignity and rights, and yet he is at the same time the embodiment of divine pro-existence. He acts beneficently towards all by offering forgiveness to all, even as he suffers violence from their hands. Empowered by Christ's Spirit, his followers are called into a like self-donation. Yet, such a form of pro-existence runs against the grain of human self-preservation and the self-promoting individualism of our day with its implicit rejection of the "other" through an ideology of individual rights that demands that others be sacrificed.

Since the Sermon addresses only those who have responded to Christ's call, it is easily assumed that its message does not directly bear on what the Preamble of the UDHR embraces, the "inherent dignity ... of all members of the human family" This superficial reading, however, fails to consider the universal presence of sin which produces socio-historical conditions that contradict human existence, dignity, liberty and brotherly love. Those, who through faith have consented to open themselves to Christ's redemptive work, also participate in his liberating activity, taking to heart the struggle against the old oppressive order. By hearing the word of Christ, they respond to it by sharing in Spirit, and so embody the ethos of the Sermon.

Through this new form of imitation, Christian hope proposes a far-reaching alternative to naturalistic conceptions of the future. This hope speaks of destiny, not fate, of redemption, not of an historical process; it anticipates the kingdom of God and does not look to moral progress as humanity's ultimate achievement. These different approaches have profound implications for the perception of how the human condition may be altered. For instance, contemporary society, including the human rights system, may feel justified in rejecting the Christian option while at the same time presuming to maintain its goals of a meaningful destiny and a community of love and forgiveness. Yet this proposal makes little sense, because without Christianity the logical grounds for attributing a peculiar dignity to every individual, regardless of outward character, would disappear, and with the removal of their "logical grounds," these values that undergird human dignity and human rights begin to suffer. If these are compromised, the political and moral order on which Western civilization

is built would begin to crumble.⁶⁹

When the Sermon on the Mount declares that humanity cannot serve two masters (Matt. 6:22-24), it clearly recognizes the alternatives involved. The call of Christ involves a radical choice. Human life is either lived out in surrender to God or is subjected to the dark urges of acquisitive desire. Responding positively to Christ's summons in an attitude of creaturely simplicity towards the Creator frees human beings from the compulsion to grasp and possess (Matt. 6:25ff). Refusing Christ's call means on the other hand that the drive to secure the goods of life is infected by the dynamics of rivalrous acquisition, as mammon rules. Having renounced the deceptive security of mammon, those who go after the "better righteousness" (Matt. 5:20), are called both "poor" and "blessed."

The contrast between pro-existence and the paradigm of human rights can be taken further. The Christian vocation affects the way in which even lawful rights claims may be asserted. Jesus exhorts the disciples not to respond to injury with the *Lex talionis* demanding "a tooth for a tooth", which in the OT represented legitimate violence, but by turning the other cheek (Matt. 5:38-42). The former was the way of settling disputes and protecting personal rights (Exod. 21:24; Lev. 24:20; Deut. 19:21). It made community life possible by delimiting vendettas, protecting people against personal injustice and ensured commensurate punishment of offenders. When Jesus sets his teaching over and against this former way, he takes the principle of non-retaliation to a higher level. We would miss the point of Jesus' challenge if his injunction "not to resist an evil person" were to be interpreted as a judicial substitute for personal revenge. The follower of Christ is not to fight law with law, thus opening the way to violent forms of litigation and more general attitudes of litigiousness. Jesus' words could be expressed as saying, "do not resist in a court of law."⁷⁰

Jesus, therefore, de-legitimizes for his followers an appeal to the legal system as a means of settling disputes. He addresses deeper issues affecting the human condition in

⁶⁹ Tinder, *Political Meaning*, 48. For a wider discussion of this issue see Robert P. Kraynak and Glenn E. Tinder, *In Defense of Human Dignity: Essays for Our Times*, Loyola Topics in Political Philosophy (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

⁷⁰ This interpretation is supported by the instruction to yield gladly what people were legally entitled to keep: the "inalienable possession" of a cloak (D. A. Carson, "Matthew", in *The Expositors Bible Commentary: Matthew, Mark, Luke*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984], 155-156).

the name of a justice based on love. While the law may keep covetousness and even violence within manageable limits, ultimately legal remedy is no answer to “the river of violence which flows from the human heart”, to use John Piper’s phrase.⁷¹ As with many of Jesus’ utterances, his rejection of the law in the name of ‘another justice’ has a peculiar shock value. Biblical hyperbole often points to an eschatological meaning, especially in this case. In the new age predicted by the prophets (Jer. 31:31-34; 32:37-41; Ezek. 36:46), a new heart and a new spirit will be given to enable God’s people to live out a new justice. Against this background of expectation, Jesus is expressing the character of genuine freedom from retaliatory attitudes. It will manifest in forgiveness, that is, in a new form of imitation based on conformity to the crucified and risen Victim.

Called to share in his death (Matt. 10:38-39), Christ’s followers experience a kind of dying to any reliance on human schemes for the attainment of peace and security to the exclusion of God. This kind of loss is inherent in God’s promise of eternal life. Carson speaks of “principal death” to self-interest and of a “principal commitment” to Jesus Christ himself,⁷² where the neologism “principal” connotes not only the principle, but the actual life-transforming reality that the principle itself embodies, which is Christ. While a new order of life is the promise, any system that it contests will be provoked to violent reactions (Matt. 10:24-25). That is why those who “hunger and thirst after righteousness” do not have a place in the system they call into question.

When we consider the deposit of Christian values in Western civilization, it does not surprise that the Sermon is not inimical to the longing that found expression in human rights. Yet, the notion of universal human rights “appears to be a novel teaching of dubious origin,” as Roger Ruston puts it.⁷³ Even though the church has largely embraced it, there can be no doubt that a deep ambivalence remains in relation to the human rights movement. On the one hand, it is a necessary structure in a sinful world and seems to affirm what the Sermon implicitly proclaims: the possibility of a new order. On the other hand, in the Christian vision the new order is not located in any form of self-redemption, but in God’s action in history. That the followers of Christ

⁷¹ John Piper, *“Love Your Enemies”*: Jesus’ Love Command in the Synoptic Gospels and in the Early Christian Paraenesis: A History of the Tradition and Interpretation of Its Uses (Cambridge: CUP, 1979), 90.

⁷² D.A. Carson, *Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount: His Confrontation with the World* (Grand Rapids: Global Christian Publishers, 1978, 1987, 1999), 270.

⁷³ Roger Ruston, *Human Rights and the Image of God* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 3-4.

participate in such action is part of the mystery of faith that receives its light and energies from God. Communal transformation is, therefore, not a merely human possibility in the way the human rights project presents it. Given the presence of human sin, championing the rights of the oppressed without repentance and grace too readily turns into an exercise in self-righteous self-magnification.

Finally, Christian existence differs radically from philosophical conceptions of social thought, even if the starting point is a dialogical model of human intersubjectivity, as German philosopher Jürgen Habermas proposes. In this scheme, advancing secularization simply replaces the integrative power of religion with “communicative action.”⁷⁴ Since, Habermas’ understands “religion” more in terms of the “primitive sacred” (cf. cultural theorist René Girard) not in terms of the Judeo-Christian tradition, he can neither appreciate its narrative ability to critique collective activity nor can he offer a radical critique of structural violence.⁷⁵

Conclusion

These reflections have shown that, despite the undeniable echo of contemporary human rights thinking with the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Christian view of humanity, of human liberty, dignity and community differ considerably from humanist-naturalist conceptions of life. Likewise, its vision of the future and source of hope are divine rather than of human origin. These differences have serious implications for the way the present crisis, particularly the question of irrepressible human violence is addressed.

In the Christian conception, the value of the human is gauged by the depth of God’s affirmation of human existence in Christ, a divine intention operative “from before the foundation of the world” (Eph. 1:4). Although sinful, human beings are beloved and exalted. While they are sinners, they are justified – as bearers of God’s image, no matter how perverted, they are destined for glory. Since God promises to conform

⁷⁴ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen, with introduction by Thomas McCarthy (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990).

⁷⁵ Wolfgang Palaver, “Macht und Gewalt”, in *Theologische Ethik Im Diskurs: Eine Einführung*, ed. Walter Lesch and Alberto Bondolfi (Tübingen; Basel: Francke Verlag, 1995), 191-211.

human beings to the image of his Son “that [the Son] might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8: 29-30), human destiny becomes the “drama of discovery and realization” of which Christ is the underlying principle.⁷⁶ Destiny, therefore, is not fate with its deterministic connotations. Destiny, rather, presents an open future which, although divinely ordained, invites free and active human participation. Human destiny is fulfilled by entering the drama of salvation in response to God’s call in history.

The God-given dignity of human beings has implications in the discussion of human rights. The UDHR can speak of such values as our “inherent dignity” and our “equal and inalienable rights” as the “foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Yet, it rarely considers that these values, which lend shape to our political and legal order, have a theological foundation. These values stand opposed to all forms of victimization. But if these values are presented in the form of human rights as the signal achievements of “enlightened reason,” the fact is obscured that this “enlightenment” is gained at the expense of its true foundation. However, when the divine/human drama ceases to be the theological foundation of human dignity, human liberation is reduced to illusionary processes such as humanly activated “emancipation” and humanly engineered “progress.” Yet, neither “emancipation” nor “progress” can deliver humanity from the entrapment to violence or bring freedom from the associated guilt and the existential “angst” that is rooted in the fear of death. As Metz reminds us, “No inner-worldly improvement in the conditions of liberty is sufficient to grant justice to the dead, nor does it touch redemptively the injustice and absurdity of past sorrows.”⁷⁷

What then of the future of human rights? Here I return to the question left open at the beginning of the essay: whether the human rights project is futile because it cannot breach the vicious circle of the politics of cruelty.

Implicit in the above question is again the question of hope. Cast in this wider context, we can ask, what hope can a worldview offer if Christian hope is rejected? The human rights discourse conceives of human existence in autonomous terms and derives its hope

⁷⁶ Tinder, *Political Meaning*, 29.

⁷⁷ Johann Baptist Metz, “Erlösung und Emanzipation.” In *Erlösung und Emanzipation: Questiones Disputatae 61*, edited by Karl Rahner and Heinrich Schlier. Theologische Redaktion Herbert Vorgrimler, 121–40 (Freiburg; Basel; Wien: Herder, 1973), 131. (my translation).

from belief in human progress (the dialectic between the politics of power and resistance).⁷⁸ Hence humanity interprets itself according to human possibilities. In the realm of social ethics these possibilities are given by the categories of “good and evil” of which humanity has become the creator and judge.

However, the world cannot escape the influence of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Throughout the Christian era, concern for victims has shaped the world’s cultural evolution to the point where this concern has become the central value of a planetary culture. That the world is gradually becoming one culture, derives from this concern and not the reverse. While powerful forces in the West have sought to eliminate Christianity, the more the Christian foundations have been denied, the more this concern for victims has been radicalized, not the least through the universal claims of human rights. Paradoxically, the international human rights discourse, while maintaining concern for victims as its fundamental value, tends to adopt a thoroughly anti-Christian stance, which if taken to its logical conclusion, would require especially the renunciation of the concern for victims. Whether human rights theories acknowledge it or not, the denial of Christ as the source of this concern has consequences. One of them is the gradual devolution of a loving concern for victims into an ideology that is threatening to turn into a new totalitarianism of rights, creating its own victims.

Without doubt, the church has grossly failed to live up to its own ideals, and through guilt has become open to manipulation by the accusing polemic and the furious rhetoric of the anti-Christian forces in the world who present themselves as liberators of humanity. At this juncture, it is helpful to see the domination system as one of general malignancy. The implications of this view for an understanding of the human rights paradigm and its future are important. This perspective frees us from the naïve notion that the paradigm of human rights is intrinsically “good” and in and of itself capable of transforming society. It also removes the misconception that such a capability may be realized by radicalizing the concern for victims or by appropriate reforms. Its limited viability as a transformative power and source of hope is determined at another level. If the human rights paradigm imitates Christ with the

⁷⁸ It is worth emphasizing that the human rights project is methodologically atheistic. It entertains no apocalyptic vision and no imminent expectation, only an evolutionary conception of time.

intention to displace Christ's transformative power, a passage in the New Testament points to the futility of such an attempt: "The very stone that the builders rejected has become the head of the corner," and "a stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall" (1 Pet. 2:6-8a).

As the futility of the attempt to defeat Christ will become apparent in history, the future of human rights remains suspended between divine judgment on the forces of domination and the promise of the Gospel which announces the coming of a not yet existing reality, a future that is rooted in God himself, grounding its hope in Trinitarian love:

The worthwhileness of all our efforts to create a global humanity of peace and justice will find its ultimate value in the Love that continues to give itself. Our limited horizons are expanded into an overarching horizon of hope, in adoration, even now, of the God who will be 'everything to everyone.'⁷⁹

Because the God of history has in Christ reconciled the world to himself, there is only one reality, only one realm, and God's "yes" embraces both the victims of human rights violations as well as their perpetrators in justice and love. Each, in their own particularity, is addressed by the word of Christ: "Come unto me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

This gracious invitation does not accuse, does not seek personal or political advantage but beckons, offering forgiveness and restoration to victims and perpetrators alike. Wherever, therefore, truly self-emptying action takes place that works justice and secures the rights of the oppressed, wherever steps are taken that heal the torn fabric of human existence, wherever dignity is bestowed by one human being on another, wherever the hidden urges of rivalry, resentment, and domination are brought into the light and human suffering is experienced as shared anguish leading to repentance and compassionate practice, there the Spirit of the living Christ would say, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (Mark 12:34). In this kingdom, where forgiveness heals the wounds of the past, Cain and Abel may be brothers once more.

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⁷⁹ Anthony Kelly, *The Trinity of Love*, New Theology Series, vol. 4 (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1989), 27.