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No One Is Disposable: A Biblical-Theological Foundation of Human Rights

Martin Junge

Those were extremely hard years. The military coup of General Augusto Pinochet established itself with brutal violence in my country, Chile, which had previously gone through a period of strong political and social tensions.

The order established by the military regime was imposed with fierce repression. Political parties were banned, and leaders and members of opposition parties were persecuted, forced into exile, tortured, or assassinated. The same fate befell leaders of social movements and organizations, including churches. Anyone who criticized the regime was considered an enemy. And whoever was considered an enemy had no place in the new political, economic, and social project that the military dictatorship set out to develop. The marginalization of the opposition through repression was part of this project, a collateral effect, as it was referred to later as a way of justification.

The perverse logic was thus imposed according to which it would be necessary and inevitable to sacrifice individual and collective rights. It would therefore be legitimate to repress, torture, and eliminate people—and this only to make a political project viable. Human lives were subjected, and many sacrificed, for the sake of a new, evolving so-called patriotic goal. This new vision for the nation, however, was built on the exclusion of some of its citizens. In the eyes of those in power, some of them became disposable.

Thus, the state, which by definition is responsible for establishing a framework of law that protects the individual and collective rights of people, ended up usurping them. Abandoning its role as a guarantor of rights, it became a perpetrator of abuses.

Is there anything to protect the individual when a nation, society, or community finds itself in such a totalitarian and exclusionary drift? To what or to whom can people turn when they find themselves confronted with the powers of the state, subject to that abysmal asymmetry of power, and therefore absolutely defenceless?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Awakening from one of these nightmares in which totalitarian regimes again had turned against their own citizens, the international community of states adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948.

It was a response to the bloody violence experienced during the two world wars, and in particular to the brutality with which Adolf Hitler's Nazi regime pursued its hegemonic project that included the deliberate annihilation of Jews, Roma, and homosexuals, among others. And a bit further east, the horrors perpetrated by the Leninist and Stalinist regimes offered the same compelling reasons for the international community to seek agreements to protect human lives from recurrent totalitarian drifts.

Thus, human rights were adopted. For the first time in history, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights formally established and crafted into a framework of rights the principle that every person enjoys the right to be treated equally, regardless of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, caste, religion, belief, sex, gender, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, sex characteristics, age, health, or other status. This constitutes an inalienable right, which every legitimately established legal order has the obligation to recognize and guarantee.

I continue to believe that the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights represents a milestone in the history of humankind. It embodies the impressive advance in the expression of deep moral convictions shared by the human family, now expressed in a legal framework, that guarantees some fundamental rights to every human being and obliges states to protect them. Human rights became that higher instance to which even states can be held accountable, including their own legislation and jurisprudence.

Today, I see with concern the constant undermining of this historical achievement—not only by totalitarian states and leaders who historically have had little regard for human rights, but also by nations once considered exemplary in the promotion of human rights. The treatment that people seeking refuge and protection are receiving by some governments today is a sad example of this hidden but permanent undermining of human rights.

The increasing attempts to curtail their universal claim by putting legislation in place that subordinates human rights to national law is another sad example. It represents a frontal attack on the very intention of human rights and how they should hold states accountable.

More than an achievement, therefore, human rights remain a task.

Human Rights and Faith

The human rights framework is the resounding response to the nightmare experienced by much of humanity during the period of the two world wars, a resolute “never again” that went beyond a simple act of declamation but ventured to set a binding framework of law for the international community.

Their adoption, however, represents a culmination of a continuous development, the origins of which go back even centuries before they were adopted.¹

One of these roots is to be found in philosophy, particularly in Greco-Roman Stoicism and later in the philosophers of the Enlightenment and Idealism, who declared that every person owns an inherent dignity resulting from what these philosophical currents established as constitutive of their humanity; the use of reason and the capacity to make rational decisions.

The development of the concept of natural law and its implications (freedom, property, and so on) also had a decisive influence on the formulation of human rights.

The question of whether the Judeo-Christian religion should be considered as another root that led to the development of human rights remains controversial.

I believe that a cautious approach is advisable; as I intend to show in what follows, there are indeed direct lines of connection and clear correspondences between Christian faith and human rights. Thus, for example, the idea of a special, unique, inalienable dignity of the human being, a basic precept around which human rights evolve, is a core belief in Judeo-Christian thought.

At the same time, a self-critical view is advisable; there were periods in which churches looked askance at some of the precursor ideas to the formulation

1. A concise overview of theological issues in a historical perspective around human rights can be found in Christine Schliesser, *Zur Theologie der Menschenrechte, Positionen und Perspektiven* (Zurich: University of Zurich, 2019), https://www.zora.uzh.ch/id/eprint/162119/1/Zur_Theologie_der_Menschenrechte._Positionen_und_Perspektiven.pdf.

of human rights and the anthropological definitions they proposed.² Once adopted in 1948, a great deal of work was needed to articulate their theological foundation and to foster their acceptance and inclusion by the churches.³

Faith convictions indeed represent both a context and a breeding ground on which the development of what later became the human rights framework evolved. However, churches have taken up the human rights framework in a rather reactive way, despite the substance Christian faith provides.⁴

A cautious approach is also advisable given the universal character and claim of human rights, as well as the broad consensus on which it rests, including among other religions. “Welcoming the Stranger,” a statement underlining the basic interreligious agreement about the sanctity of life and the need to protect those seeking refuge, may stand here as one example for this deep shared consensus across religions.⁵

In what follows, I will set out the biblical-theological elements that offer the most evident points of connection between faith and human rights and thus demonstrate the affinity that exists between them.

The Bible and Human Rights

I remember, from those hard years in my country, a small booklet produced by an ecumenical organization whose aim was to highlight the affinity between faith and human rights. The booklet carried the title *The Bible and Human Rights*. Each page was divided into two columns: on the left

2. This is particularly true for the French Revolution, which set out to express some of the philosophical convictions mentioned above and is definitely a precursory milestone in the way toward the formulation of human rights. The distance of churches is partly related to the strong anti-clerical mindset and actions that became an integral part of the French Revolution.

3. In the ecumenical setting, it is the 5th Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Nairobi (1975) which dealt extensively with the thematic of human rights, taking up disperse processes that had already taken place before that Assembly. In the Catholic Church, it was the Pope John XXIII's 1963 Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* which paved the way for a positive approach to human rights.

4. Some of the controversies and discussions are well captured in the Susan Durber, *Putting God to Rights: A Theological Reflection on Human Rights* (Christian Aid, 2016), https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-08/putting-god-to-rights-report-june-2016_0.pdf. I regret the choice of the title of this publication, which is in no way helpful for its declared intention to support churches to recognize the strong links between faith and human rights.

5. See <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-welcoming-stranger>.

were the 30 articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, one after the other, and on the right, as a commentary, some biblical verses that have a direct connection with the article in question.

The connection between the two is striking, sometimes even reaching almost textual similarities between the biblical passages and some of the articles of the declaration.

The message of the ecumenical publication was unequivocal, as it demonstrated the strong correlation between the biblical texts and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For those churches under strong political pressure by the military regime, because of their defence of people whose human rights were being abused, the booklet demonstrated that the churches were right to raise their voices and that they were doing so in full coherence with the biblical witness.⁶

In retrospect, however, and exposed to other debates related to human rights, I have recognized that the line of argumentation followed by the publication has its risks. While it identifies the undeniable correlation between Christian faith and human rights, its literal approach, equating biblical verses with specific articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and removing them from their historical, cultural, and theological contexts, represents a double-edged sword.

Indeed, we know that this very approach is used by those who wish to demonstrate the exact opposite and who question, with biblical verses in hand, the general validity of the human rights framework for God's plans of salvation, and consequently for the church and its vocation in the world, or who deny human rights to persons or groups to whom specific biblical verses refer in pejorative terms and whom they harshly condemn.

Consequently, a Christian foundation of human rights cannot be limited to the collection of biblical verses. It must enter the field of hermeneutics and theology to produce the evidence that human rights do not contradict faith convictions but take them up, expressing them—thus my proposition—within another framework of reference and using for these purposes another

6. See an excellent overview of the role of evangelical churches opposing military dictatorship and engaging with human rights: Miguel Angel Mansilla, Juan Sepúlveda, and Luis Orellana, "Cuando el opio se rebela: La Confraternidad de Iglesias (Evangélicas) en su crítica a la dictadura militar y su proyecto de sociedad (1981–1989)," in *Revista de Ciencia Política* 35:2 (Chile: Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2015), 327–45, https://www.scielo.cl/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0718-090X2015000200004.

nomenclature—those of the public space (see below, Human Rights: A Commitment and a Field of Action for the Church).

Human Beings: Created in God's Image

Undoubtedly, one of the most profound links between Christian faith and human rights is the biblical reference to human beings as created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26ff). Sometimes with different nuances, all theological traditions and Christian denominations share this fundamental fact of theological anthropology.⁷ It results in the view that human beings are endowed with an inalienable dignity and value by the mere fact of being a creature of God.

This theological argument, based on the Old Testament account of creation, finds an important and necessary extension through a New Testament approach and its references to the new creation in Christ. This Christological approach does not diminish or undo what the creation account postulates regarding the human being as created in the image and likeness of God; instead, it deepens this message by emphasizing the equality of all persons in Christ and the secondary status of all difference because of this belonging to Christ (Gal. 3:26-28).

From a Lutheran perspective, within which I place myself while offering these reflections, it is important to add the fundamental postulate of Lutheran doctrine, justification by faith through grace alone, which, from another angle, reinforces the same message of the incommensurable value of human beings and of each individual for what they constitute in the eyes of God and whom God recreates through the merits of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, Reformation, with its strong emphasis on the *extra nos*, hence on God's actions and gifts that come from outside of the realm of humankind and human action, constitutes another fundamental step in the development of the notion that human beings own something as inalienable value, which is not the result of any work or doing. It is therefore not at the disposal of human beings because its origin is in God. Human dignity is a gift that escapes appropriation or, worse, denial. It cannot be stripped away.

7. Among the debates is the question how much of that image is still present after the original sin and whether humankind is even able to opt for the good or is bound to fail, given its fallen nature. These questions have implications on the connection one may draw between the *imago Dei* and the human rights discourse.

From this biblical-theological understanding of human beings, three aspects emerge that find their correlation in the conceptual framework on which human rights evolve; each individual human being possesses an immeasurable, intrinsic, and inalienable value; there is a fundamental equality among all human beings because of this gift that is common to them, and the existence of bonds of solidarity that arise from the condition they share.

No One Is Disposable; No One Is Dispensable

This last aspect, solidarity, is especially evident in God's clear priority, predilection, and concern for the dispossessed, the marginalized, the impoverished, and the oppressed. The biblical witness is unequivocal regarding this "preferential option for the poor," as liberation theology called it, popularizing this biblical approach in the theological narratives of the contemporary church.

In the Old Testament, it is the voice of the prophets that raises awareness among the people of Israel, reminding them of their special responsibility to protect all people in vulnerable situations and denouncing all arbitrary acts that violate their rights and their very lives (Amos 5:24; Jer. 22:15-16; Is. 29:20-21). The prophets leave no doubt; God does not tolerate injustice and arbitrariness that tramples and crushes human lives. Instead, God rejoices where individual and communal life flourishes in a *shalom* that embraces all dimensions of well-being and includes all people.

The gospels present Jesus firmly rooted in this prophetic tradition, repeatedly surprising his own disciples with his radical outreach to people considered marginal and provoking discomfort and resistance from the politico-religious powers (Luke 5:30). Announcing the in-breaking reign of God, Jesus deliberately subverted what powers-that-be defended as the natural order of things (Mark 3:1-6).

Examples abound of this solid and decisive witness by which Jesus confronted a logic of exclusion on which the social, economic, political, and religious order was based. The parable of the lost sheep (Matt. 18:10-14) emphasizes this with unmistakable firmness: in the kingdom of God, one is the most important number. Where a single sheep is lost, the community of the 99 breaks up and ends up wrecked, losing all its meaning and legitimacy.

It is of utmost importance to include this biblical feature, the predilection of God for the broken, oppressed, marginalized, and poor, when referring to the correlation that exists between the biblical testimony and the human

rights framework, especially when one hears repeatedly the criticism that human rights would place human beings at the centre of all things, an anthropocentrism that would not be compatible with the centrality and supremacy of God over all of God's creation, endowing human beings with rights that would not belong to them.

This criticism seems to forget that it is God, revealed in Jesus Christ, who places this emphasis on human beings and particularly on the marginalized, oppressed, and violated individual person. It is God who admonishes those in power to uphold the law and its intention to protect lives. It is God, in and through Jesus Christ, who questions all orders that operate on the principle of the exclusion and the oppression of people as well as the subjugation of their rights. Such orders are—in the light of God's inbreaking reign as revealed in Jesus Christ—a calamitous disorder.

For God, every life counts and every life matters. For God, there are no disposable lives.

God Becomes a Person and Gets Involved in the World

With the above, we address a third line of argument that is fundamental when establishing the link between Christian faith and human rights; the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5-8, John 1:14).

This fact is important in a double sense. First, because it points to a radical revaluation of human beings. Through Jesus Christ, God rescues humankind from its ways of (self-)destruction. By grace, God leads human beings back to paths that have their horizon in God's promises for the entire world. God transforms them to recognize themselves, their neighbours, and the world around them as created by God and, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to align their steps and actions toward this reality revealed by faith.

This radical revaluation of human beings offered by the theology of incarnation is essential for our subject. It counters the line of thought according to which it is not possible to establish a direct link between the theological understanding of human beings and the human rights framework because of the fallen nature of humankind (Gen. 3). Following this line of thought, the fall would entail the loss of the *imago Dei*. Therefore, so the argument goes, the link between human dignity, resulting from the *imago Dei*, and its formulation in a framework of positive law, the human rights, does not exist.

Such negative theological anthropology gives very little value to human beings and opens the gates for a denigrating treatment of human beings and even justifies it.

With God's incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ, fully human and fully God, the argument loses all meaning. God comes in person to the rescue of human beings, seeks every individual, to revalue their humanity, including their dignity that God confers onto all.

One of the biblical texts that very strongly underlines this aspect is the judgment of the nations (Matt. 25:31-46), which urges seeing Christ himself in all those human beings in need. Christ, tortured and killed on the cross by the powerful of his time, resurrected and brought back to life by the One who is above these powers, confirms the validity of this image and reiterates therefore that Christ dwells in the neighbour in need. The cross of Christ represents the violent human objection to God's inclusive project and God's love for each singular life; the resurrection, in contrast, is God's powerful message that rejects human sacrifice once and forever (Heb. 10:14).

The second significant aspect for the link between Christian faith and human rights that stems from God's incarnation in Jesus Christ is the decisive step God takes toward the world for its total transformation. In the person of Jesus Christ, God engages with the totality of God's creation, with the entire world, pointing it to what it is in its deepest sense and setting it on the path of transformation to finally become what it ought to be.

There is no planet B. This is true also for salvation; it is this world, not another, that the Triune God is leading into the reality of God's full and ongoing reign.

The Church's Participation in God's Holistic Mission

From this Christological perspective, with its focus on the incarnation of Christ and on the cross and resurrection—as opposed to a logic that relies on exclusion, torture, and death as necessary to establish any human order—an important implication for the role of the church in the world emerges.

In missiological terms, it has become prevalent in the ecumenical arena to speak of God's mission, a concept that stresses the missional nature of the Triune God and sees the origin and ownership of mission in the missional

God.⁸ This concept contradicts the notion that the church could have its own mission. The church participates in God's mission, and believers are called through baptism to get involved in mission to express it in today's world. The mission of the church is none other than the mission of the Triune God that it is called to incarnate.

Consequently, the church will follow that same dynamic revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, with its strong drive into the world, engaging it decisively and passionately to communicate the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Disregard for the things of the world is not an option for a church that knows about its calling to participate in what the Triune God initiated in this world and continues to do to this day. Nor is withdrawal from the world an option because it would mean withdrawing from what God is making and will bring to its fullness. The call of the church is to participate in God's mission; this call represents both the vocation and the task in the specific contexts where the church lives, with the people, situations, and structures of its time and place.

Along with this basic definition of mission, the reference to holistic mission has also imposed itself in current missiological discourse.⁹ Again, based on what God revealed in Jesus Christ, this concept emphasizes a mission that is composed of three specific dimensions: the proclamation (and teaching) of the word, service to the neighbour in need (*diakonia*), and public advocacy for peace with justice and reconciliation. Together, these three dimensions configure the spheres of action for the church participating in God's mission. The church will preach, serve the neighbour, and advocate in the public space as it participates in God's transforming work.

From this perspective, issues of public life—in particular, all those that relate to justice, peace, and reconciliation—are part of the ministry of the church, as is service to those in need and the preaching of the word of God. These three dimensions are inseparable and vital for a church in mission.

8. See relevant resources on the CWME web page: <https://www.oikoumene.org/what-we-do/commission-on-world-mission-and-evangelism>. See also Lutheran World Federation, *Mission in Context: Transformation, Reconciliation, Empowerment* (Geneva: LWF, 2004), <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-mission-context-transformation-reconciliation-empowerment>.

9. See Lutheran World Federation, *Mission in Context*.

Human Rights: A Commitment and a Field of Action for the Church

From the above, it becomes clear that there are deep connecting lines between Christian faith and human rights. It is easy to recognize the correspondence between some of the fundamental faith convictions about the intrinsic sanctity and value of human beings and the need to safeguard and protect their life and their conceptualization in human rights. There is a correlation between what faith holds as the basic norms that guide the coexistence in community (the Ten Commandments are cited by many as another biblical element that offers an important connection with human rights) and what human rights establish as the moral framework for human coexistence and the resulting legal obligations for the state and its powers. There is an important congruence and a significant alignment between what faith discerns as God's overall will and the ultimate objectives of the human rights framework: to preserve and protect human life, enabling it to flourish fully, free from violence and oppression.

Distinguishing without Separating

And yet, it is also important to stress that faith and human rights belong to different categories which are distinct from each other. It is important to maintain this distinction, thereby avoiding undue confusion between the word of God and the declaration of human rights; between this world as it is, given its fallen nature, and the world as it will come, given the Triune God's decisive action. However, this distinction should never lead to a separation and disconnection: both perspectives must be held together dialectically.

In Lutheran theology, this dialectic relationship is framed by the doctrine of the two realms, according to which God governs and cares for creation in two distinct yet intrinsically connected and congruent ways. The spiritual realm evolves around the gospel message of Jesus Christ and its good news of God's justification through Jesus Christ. At the core of the worldly realm is God's same care and concern, now expressed in God's will for justice and the establishment of orders that safeguard a peaceful life. Laws are part of this ordering care of God for its fallen creation, a way of preserving the world and life from destruction. Faith, as a relationship with God, becomes active in love, care, and concern for the neighbour.

Human rights come with this theological legitimacy. They express in the secular realm that same concern of God for the flourishing of all life, and they represent the instrument that avoids arbitrary oppression, denial of human dignity, and destruction of life.

Instead of constructing unhelpful hierarchies between God's laws and only human laws (human rights), a recourse sometimes used by churches to escape from the obligations stemming from human rights, it is important to keep both of these categories dialectically related to each other.

Human rights use the nomenclature of rights and create lines of accountability that refer to human organizations and structures. Human rights are indeed a human invention yet belong to the realm of God's reign in the secular space, safeguarding the life and dignity of all, a life in peace with justice.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer introduced a helpful category when speaking of the ultimate and penultimate things. He called churches to engage fully in the penultimate things, hence with the world as it is, while living out their baptismal vocation and waiting for the ultimate things to unfold by the action of the Triune God.¹⁰

There is no reason to become dismissive of human rights. Therefore, there is no way to place the church, which lives in this penultimate time, outside of the worldly realm, and hence outside of the sphere of human rights. In theological terms, the church, too, receives God's caring concern in both the gospel's message and in a framework of law that protects life while God perfects this world. Human rights are thus a natural commitment and a task for the church. Not only in view of the other, the neighbour out there in the world, but for the church itself, which lives under the word of God and in the world at the same time.

Defence of Human Rights: A Matter of the Churches' Citizenship in This World

The church is naturally well equipped to carry out this task, both in view of its deep convictions of faith and because of the mission into which it is called. This is even more the case if the church understands its citizenship in the world and locates itself as an actor within civil society. As such, it will advocate for a public space that is open and inclusive and which allows for equal participation of all.

10. *Ethics: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, Vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).

Based on the same distinction of the realms as offered above, the church will refrain from imposing its faith convictions on people of different belief, thereby always supporting both a public space and its legal framework that includes all people. Theocratic approaches in the church's participation in the public space need to be rejected in the same way as a withdrawal from its responsibility to participate and shape that public space.¹¹

In its publication *The Church in the Public Space*,¹² the Lutheran World Federation offered the following guidance for the churches' public engagement:

- to assess public issues in participatory ways
- to build relationships of trust among all actors in the public space
- to challenge injustice
- to discover signs of hope
- to empower people in need

The human rights framework is the common language of the human family that articulates deep convictions of faith and translates them into an enforceable framework of rights applicable to all. It represents a privileged tool for the churches' engagement. It requires the church, its leaders, and its members to be "bilingual," understanding which language to use where and when, keeping distinctions without separating, thereby always upholding the fundamental conviction of faith that for God there is no disposable person.

11. Heiner Bielefeldt, the Special UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion and Belief from 2010 to 2016, did extraordinary work in defining the relationship of religion and human rights, and defending its universal claim, such as by developing the notion of cultural overlap, which is pivotal in today's globalized world seeking to escape from colonial bondage.

12. Lutheran World Federation, *The Church in the Public Space* (2016–2021), <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/resource-church-public-space>.