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Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Lambriniadis, Elpidophoros
Publisher	Globethics.net;World Council of Churches
Rights	2022 WCC Publications & Globethics.net;Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International
Download date	2026-06-13 05:59:41
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Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/4260156

Christians Perspectives on Human Dignity and Human Rights from Orthodox Perspectives

Elpidophoros Archbishop Lambriniadis

The Orthodox Church has a valuable contribution to make on the issue of human rights both as a philosophical principle and as a legal reality. The theological framework and the spiritual commitment of the church in favour of human rights should help in articulating the paradox and contradictions between the universal protection of human dignity and aspects of human rights that focus on the individual rights reduced to an expression of individual autonomy, separated from God.

Speaking of human rights today means referring to human dignity, the protection of freedom, non-discrimination, equality and justice, and international peace. Human rights are the core values of humanism in the modern world. From their two classical declarations (American and French) in the second half of the 18th century up until today, human rights movements have proved capable of responding to new challenges, previously unknown threats to human dignity, as well as new forms of oppression and exploitation. They are not a panacea for the problems and injustices in our societies, which are marked by the seal of sin, but they are an essential and effective tool for the foundation and protection of freedom, equality, and justice. They are the symbol of our modern civilization.

The point of convergence of the Orthodox Church and the human rights movement is the concern for human dignity, freedom, and justice. The existing tensions between Orthodoxy and modern human rights are rooted not only in Judeo-Christian principles, but also in historical contexts.

Human Value

A key notion for Orthodoxy is the concept of the human person, a concept directly related to the patristic tradition in which the notion of personhood (*πρόσωπον*) properly expresses the meaning of the creation of the human being in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26). The foundation of human dignity provides the human being with the highest value, the sacredness of

communion. All humans find their origin in God their Creator.

By creating humankind, God granted it the gift of freedom, which he imprinted on the image he freely offered it. The iconic dimension assumed by the Christian tradition manifests the action of the revealed Holy Trinity, made accessible by the incarnation of the Logos. This *imago Dei* manifests itself in the rationality of humankind and in its ability to form relationships.

The church is an existential space of absolute freedom through participation in the nature of God, which is made willingly accessible but exists beyond any predetermination. The common meaning of freedom is now reduced to the implementation of individual choices. Thus, freedom has become just another word for free will, that is, the ability to enforce individual choice. Over the centuries, however, free will has acquired a heavily theological dimension.

Freedom is a central anthropological and soteriological question in late Christian history, especially after the Reformation. It is generally interpreted using the patristic distinction between two types of will: the natural will of human beings, which is submitted to the constraints of the natural instinct; and the deliberative will or gnostic will, which uses logic and judgment to free human beings of these natural constraints and allows generosity and love, but also sin and temptation.

Egoistic forces continue to separate us from the beneficial end of taking root in the divine synergy described by St Basil the Great and St John Damascus. The renewed man is called to choose the good. This is the essential condition for his freedom. By good, one must not only understand a value judgment opposing evil, but also the ability to rediscover the relational vocation of humanity as opposed to individualism. As Christ said: “The truth will make you free” (John 8:32) and “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14:6).

Freedom and Communion

The Orthodox Church insists on the fact that humans are relational beings, an image of God’s communion in which we can deepen the reality of coexistence, dialogue, and freedom. The recent document blessed by the Ecumenical Patriarchate, *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church*, insists on the connection between freedom and our quest for God’s communion: “It is the realization of one’s nature in its own proper good end, one’s ability to flourish in the full range of one’s humanity—which

for the human person entails freely seeking union with God.”¹

Human rights are a legal reality expressing principles such as individual freedom, equality for all without exception, and human dignity. From these principles result more specific rights: freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the right to private property, the right to safety, and so on. Then, more specific definitions organize the life of the city through economic, social, and political rights. While Orthodoxy embraces the principles of human rights, it sees many limitations in the way they are disconnected from faith and religion. The lack of commitment to the universality of human rights and to the implementation of that universality have also created a paradoxical situation for the Orthodox Church itself. An excerpt from *For the Life of the World* reads:

The language of human rights may not say all that can and should be said about the profound dignity and glory of creatures fashioned after the image and likeness of God; but it is a language that honours that reality in a way that permits international and interfaith cooperation in the work of civil rights and civil justice, and that therefore says much that should be said. The Orthodox Church, therefore, lends its voice to the call to protect and advance human rights everywhere, and to recognize those rights as both fundamental to and inalienable from every single human life.²

Because even in the acceptance of individual liberties as a space, small as it may be, of human free will, the implementation of the law opposes our monstrous selfishness and allow us to become beings of communion and relationship. When these rights are denied, the quest for equal rights remains crucial. When they are granted, a spiritual quest becomes necessary to avoid the danger of individualism and to create circumstances in which it is possible to reveal the image of God by being fully human.

1. David Bentley Hart and John Chryssavgis, eds, *For the Life of the World: Toward a Social Ethos of the Orthodox Church* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2020), 62.

2. Hart and Chryssavgis, *For the Life of the World*, 61.

Religious Freedom and Belief

The Holy and Great Council of Crete in 2016 stated:

A fundamental human right is the protection of the principle of religious freedom in all its aspects – namely, the freedom of conscience, belief, and religion, including, alone and in community, in private and in public, the right to freedom of worship and practice, the right to manifest one's religion, as well as the right of religious communities to religious education and to the full function and exercise of their religious duties, without any form of direct or indirect interference by the state.³

The struggle for religious freedom or belief and the respect for the conscience of every human being should be proof of the triumph of love over hatred, of unity over division, and of compassion over the numbing sensation of indifference that is rooted in contemporary materialism. True freedom of conscience is based on the conviction that our relationship with the other is not separate from, but is integrally related to, our relationship with ourselves. After all, as St Paul suggests, we are all members of one body (Rom. 12:5).

In countries and cultures where there are dominant viewpoints, faith traditions, and political and economic instruments, the rights of the majority can be truly and justly secured only by guaranteeing the full human and religious rights of all minorities. This is why the Ecumenical Patriarchate tirelessly seeks to promote the rights of all peoples and faiths, both in Turkey and worldwide. For the measure with which we treat and honour others is the measure with which we can also expect to be recognized and respected.

Modern Slavery

If invoking human rights is the normative response to various challenges in the modern world, they must also be used to confront modern slavery, one of the most extreme violations of human dignity. Countless children, women, and men around the world are currently suffering from different forms of human trafficking; forced labour of children and adults; sex trafficking of men, women and children; forced prostitution; forced and early marriage; recruitment of child soldiers; exploitation of migrants and refugees; organ

3. Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church (Crete, 2016), para. 16, <https://www.holycouncil.org/encyclical-holy-council>.

trafficking; and so on. The endless caravans of people forced by open violence to leave their homes, seeking protection and security, as well as the victims of structural violence, poverty, and famine, are vulnerable groups among which organized criminals easily find their victims.

This is precisely why we believe that responding to the problem of modern slavery is directly and inseparably linked to care for creation, which has been at the centre of the ministry of the Ecumenical Patriarchate over the last quarter of a century. The entire world is the body of Christ, just as human beings are the very body of Christ. The whole planet bears the traces of God, just as every person is created in the image of God. The way we respect creation reflects the way we respond to our fellow human beings. The scars that we inflict on our environment reveal our willingness to exploit our brother and sister.

We should unite our efforts to eradicate modern slavery in all its forms, across the world and for all time. The 2014 Declaration of Religious Leaders against Modern Slavery stated that slavery is “a crime against humanity.” We are committed “to do all in our power, within our faith communities and beyond, to work together for the freedom of all those who are enslaved and trafficked so that their future may be restored.” On the way to achieving this categorical imperative, our adversary is not simply modern slavery, but also the spirit that nourishes it, the deification of profit, consumerism, discrimination, racism, sexism, and egocentrism.⁴

Migration

The 21st century began as the century of migrants and refugees. Endless caravans, a widespread flood of children, men and women seeking protection and security—victims of violence, poverty, famine, and climate change—forced to leave their homes by wars and armed conflicts or during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The presence of these refugees and asylum seekers, of economic and undocumented migrants, of trafficked persons, and of those searching for their lost families is a harsh daily reality in many countries. Their vulnerability and suffering confront us, disrupt us, and seize our conscience. We experience this contemporary global social crisis caused by globalization and armed

4. See Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Archbishop Justin of Canterbury, “Joint Declaration on Modern Slavery,” 7 February 2018, <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/node/149/printable/print>.

conflicts as a crisis not only of politics and economics but of the very essence of our religious faith and our fundamental moral and ethical responsibilities.

Defending the dignity of refugees and migrants is nothing less than the church fulfilling its mission of *diakonia* in the world. The Orthodox Church clearly expressed this spirit in the Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council, which addressed the main challenges for humanity today. Referring to the problem of migration and refugees, the Encyclical states:

The contemporary and ever-intensifying *refugee and migrant crisis*, due to political, economic and environmental causes, is at the center of the world's attention. The Orthodox Church has always treated and continues to treat those who are persecuted, in danger and in need on the basis of the Lord's words: 'I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, and was a stranger and you took me in, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to me', and 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these my brethren, you did for me' (Matt 25.40). Throughout its history, the Church was always on the side of the 'weary and heavy laden' (cf. Matt 11.28). At no time was the Church's philanthropic work limited merely to circumstantial good deeds toward the needy and suffering, but rather it sought to eradicate the causes which create social problems. The Church's 'work of service' (Eph 4.12) is recognized by everyone. "We appeal therefore, first of all, to those able to remove the causes for the creation of the refugee crisis to take the necessary positive decisions. We call on the civil authorities, the Orthodox faithful and the other citizens of the countries in which they have sought refuge and continue to seek refuge to accord them every possible assistance, even from out of their own insufficiency."⁵

In April 2016, H.A.H. Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew visited the island of Lesbos with H.H. Pope Francis of Rome and H.B. Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece, to tangibly demonstrate their concern for the dramatic situation of the refugees fleeing to Europe from terrible violence and threats to their very lives. In their statement in Lesbos, they said:

The tragedy of forced migration and displacement affects millions, and is fundamentally a crisis of humanity, calling for a response of solidarity, compassion, generosity and an immediate practical

5. Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council, para. 19.

commitment of resources. From Lesvos, we appeal to the international community to respond with courage in facing this massive humanitarian crisis and its underlying causes, through diplomatic, political and charitable initiatives, and through cooperative efforts, both in the Middle East and in Europe.

It seems unacceptable that some Europeans, who praise human rights and who wish to appear as defenders of a Christian Europe, at the same time employ hard language against migrants and refugees and defend closed European borders. Can Europe save its identity by applying double standards?

It is likewise impossible to confront the refugee and migrant crisis on the basis of a technocratic, bureaucratic, and economy-centred Europe. Human persons are not mere objects and numbers. The economy, security, and technology can provide only temporary solutions. It is an illusion to suppose that our modern societies can remain open, democratic, peaceful, and human primarily through economic progress and security measures. An open society loses its openness if the problem of migration is not addressed according to the core European values and standards.

For Christians, “God is love” (1 John 4:8). Discrimination against human beings, closing our eyes before the suffering of our brothers and sisters, is the negation of love. Hatred and violence are the negation of human dignity in the name of human selfishness. Hatred and violence in the name of God are a negation of authentic faith and an offense against God. Wherever and whenever love and solidarity are practised, God is present. We must work constantly so that the contemporary return of God will become a return of the God of Love and the renewal of the culture of solidarity.

The Role of the Church

Religions have a crucial role to play in the future of human rights ideas and their implementation and realization in practice, to the common struggle of both the human rights movements and religions for human dignity, freedom, equality, justice, and peace.

Tensions between faith and politics are inevitable, even in the cooperation of Christian churches with human rights movements. Although human rights bear the stamp of Christianity, it would be incorrect to assume that these rights also have a Christian origin. Christian freedom is accused of being internal and incomplete, without any interest in the social dimension. St Paul attributes Christian freedom to Christian slaves without questioning

the institution of external slavery. It is a fact that Saint Paul urged Christian slaves to remain in their position (1 Cor. 7:20-24) and that he sent back the slave Onesimus, who ran away from his master, urging the latter to accept the former in the spirit of Christian brotherhood and not to punish him. For the apostle Paul, the decisive issue is not social status but the reality of being released by Christ into real freedom (Gal. 5:1). Before God, social differences lose their importance, and all faithful are allowed to participate in the Holy Eucharist. There are “no longer slave or free . . . all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). “The Church does not accept a difference between master (δеспότης) and servant (οικέτης).”⁶ In overcoming inequality on the level of Christian life, the church made discrimination and prejudice visible as a social problem. The tension between this equality before God and inequality in the social sphere led to important changes.

For instance, in facing contemporary threats against children, in the 2016 Patriarchal Encyclical for Christmas, the year 2017 was declared as the Year of the Protection of the Sacredness of Childhood. In that Encyclical, it was said:

We appeal to all of you to respect the identity and sacredness of childhood. In light of the global refugee crisis that especially affects the rights of children; in light of the plague of child mortality, hunger and child labour, child abuse and psychological violence, as well as the dangers of altering children’s souls through their uncontrolled exposure to the influence of contemporary electronic means of communication and their subjection to consumerism, we declare 2017 as the Year of Protection of the Sacredness of Childhood, inviting everyone to recognize and respect the rights and integrity of children.⁷

Peace has been reduced through the years, due to the threat of terrorism, to a security issue. As an Orthodox Christian, I believe that peace is another name of God and our role today is to bring it into the world, to offer it to the world like Christ offered himself “for the life of the world.” For Christ himself said in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matt. 5:9).

If peace comes from God, still it depends on humankind to embody it. As you all know, the theology of incarnation and *theosis* (deification), as revealed in the holy scriptures, defined by the Holy Ecumenical Councils and

6. John Chrysostom, *Commentary on the Letter to Philemon*, PG 62, 705.

7. Patriarch Bartholomew, “Patriarchal Encyclical for Christmas 2016,” <https://www.goarch.org/-/patriarchal-encyclical-for-christmas-2016>.

addressed by the church fathers, is the faith-based operating principle that inspires the church's experience as well as Christian commitment in society. But let's consider the scriptural quote: "I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth" (3 John 1:3-4).

The Orthodox Church advocates a culture of compassion, of social justice in which people share their material resources with those in need. Charity and compassion are not virtues to be practised just by those who have the material resources and means. They are virtues that promote the communal love that Christians should have for all human beings. Every human being, regardless of whether he or she is rich or poor, must be charitable and compassionate to those lacking the basic material resources for sustenance. St Basil exhorts the poor to share even the minimal goods they may have. Almsgiving leads people to God and grants all the necessary resources for sustenance and development of their human potential.

However, a voluntary sharing of resources in the present world is not enough. Building a culture of peace demands global and local institutional changes and new economic practices that address, at a more fundamental level, the root causes of poverty. It calls for a fusion of the Christian culture of compassion with the knowledge that we have acquired through experience and the advances of social science about the structural sources of poverty and its multi-layered aspects that urgently need to be addressed through reflective concerted actions. His Beatitude Archbishop Anastasios of Albania has these inspiring words: "It is [Christian love] alone that can transform society from a heap of individual grains of sand, each isolated from and indifferent to the next, into an organic whole composed of cells, each contributing to the growth of all the others."⁸

The changes the Orthodox Church wants to see happening in the world, especially in terms of the protection of peoples and of ecological protection, preservation, and sustainability, depend on our definition of love. Love alone transforms the society and turns individuals into persons. Love brings freedom. Love is the space where the person and the society meet harmoniously, respecting the integrity of the first and the unity of the second. Love embraces freedom beyond freedom for oneself, for "Love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

8. Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns* (Geneva: WCC, 2003), 71.

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