

Facing God's image – Christian Churches and the idea of Human Rights

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This Article raises the issues why human rights are necessary and how they did develop. Furthermore, it tries to give a short overview on the churches contribution and its reservations towards the development of human rights. The human rights Manual is one of the contribution to this matter.

Nowadays the influence of Christian churches and theology on the idea of Human Rights is generally not questioned. Many believe that the Reformation movement was an important milestone in the development of the modern perception of human rights. However, in order to assess the contributions made by theology and churches to this discourse, it has to be distinguished between the idea of human rights and their political implementation. Moreover, it would not seem appropriate to state a common position among the various Christian churches and Christian theology towards Human Rights. It had been the commitment of individuals or small groups, who often experience injustice in their own environment, that had a strong impact on the idea of human rights within the Christian community.

The approach of the churches on human rights in continental Europe remained until well into the 20th Century sceptic if not hostile. This was due to the fact that the impetus of the French Revolution was strongly opposing the established church institutions. The emancipatory struggle against the oppressive structures was therefore also directed against the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church in France. Furthermore, the modern idea of an autonomous subject appeared unacceptable to many theologians, since the mainstream interpretation of the gospel considered human beings as depending on God's grace and God's eschatological revelations. The emerging concept of a self-determined individual – that is entitled to certain rights solely because of being human – sounded almost blasphemous in the ears of the church. For justification was not a human right to be claimed and legally enforced.

The new perception of the human being and its world came under heavy attack and was seen as a reversal of the relationship between Creator and creature. The Rebellion against the given political structures - against the God-given system - was interpreted as a rebellion against God himself. Finally, the construct of a secular state that is free from

ecclesiastical paternalism following only its own laws, contradicted both the traditional teachings and the traditional political practice of the state church.

In the meantime the development of personal and human rights in Northern America had been supported by Christian communities from the very beginning. Many European migrants immigrated into the New World for religious reasons. Because of their experience of religious oppression and persecution they were strongly in favour of the right to conscience, the freedom of speech and religious freedom. Hence it was not a coincidence that the oldest constitutional formulation of human rights can be found in the Constitution of Rhode Island in 1636.

In order to ensure redemption between the religious parties during the period of religious wars in Europe, the Virginia Declaration of Rights in 1776 continued these efforts by establishing individual rights and the protection of individual freedoms. Article 16 of this Declaration explicitly states the religious background: "*That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity towards each other.*"

Already in the 18th century, the respect for the faith and will of fellow citizens was considered a Christian obligation that had to be shown toward all religions equally. However, this remains one of the few highlights in church history. In the times that followed, particularly in the 20th century, many national churches joined in a mixture of mistrust, political expediency and ethnic or nationalist arrogance that contributed to the fatal European history that saw two world wars.

The Church's contribution to the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 is closely related to these previous developments in world politics. The two world wars were the reason for an intensive ecumenical commitment to peace and justice. Hence the Churches' Commission on International Affairs, as a predecessor of the World Council of Churches (WCC), essentially contributed to the preparation of the Declaration's article on religious freedom.

Imago Dei - theological approach towards human rights

The classical theological justification for human rights is based on the idea of human beings as images of God. God created humanity in God's own image, and therefore all human beings equally inherit a special dignity that cannot and must not be violated by any other person or state.

Nowadays the vast majority of Christian churches are committed to the universal concept of human dignity and human rights. Especially in its fragmentary and limited being - or theologically speaking in its need for redemption - the individual is truly attached to a reality that goes beyond final definitions. A human being, created in the image of God, is never self-sufficient as an individual. As a creature s/he is set within the community of all living things and linked to his fellow humans. The Christian idea of humanity that draws its specific dignity from the *Imago Dei* has proved to be valuable. It enables us to serve the wellbeing of all fellow humans by facing God's image. What this image means becomes obvious in Jesus Christ, in whom God himself as a human being suffered under enmity and violence, standing in love and solidarity with all in this world, who suffer and are oppressed. This Incarnation Christology is the profound and essential reason why Christians are obliged to respond to any attempted violation of fundamental human rights even within the churches and throughout the societies where they live in.

It all comes down to the insight that we as Christian churches directly benefit from the fundamental human rights such as the right to religious freedom. Therefore it seems

inevitable to Christians all over the globe to commit themselves to the matter of human rights and their protection wherever it is necessary. In this way we may even find a new approach towards the world and finally to God its creator and redeemer.

Selected further reading:

Schweizer Evangelischer Kirchenbund SEK (ed.): Den Menschen ins Recht setzen. Menschenrechte und Menschenwürde aus theologisch-ethischer Perspektive. SEK Position 6, Bern 2007.

Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (ed.): Die Menschenrechte im ökumenischen Gespräch. Beiträge der Kammer für Öffentliche Verantwortung der EKD, Gütersloh 1979.