

The Biblical Bases for Human Rights

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Christian theory and practice in India have been implicated in the violation of human rights, particularly in relation to the rights of Dalits, Adivasis and women. But Christian theory and practice have also been woven into the fabric of Dalit, Adivasi and the Indian woman's faith, courage, and healing in the face of the violation of their rights. The question is whether the Christian faith and theology can become a more certain foundation and steadfast resource for justice and human rights. I believe that it can with some reconstructive work.

It was the Dalits' and other marginalized communities' exceptional need for acceptance that created openness to the Christian message. The liberation they sought was not only from the physical slavery and serfdom but also from social stigma and almost total degradation which the Christians emphasized was possible through salvation in Jesus Christ and participation in the life of the Christian Church. The Dalits were therefore offered two things, which were closely inter-related. One was a new self-image as a person whom God in fact loves and has already forgiven. The other was hope, primarily for eternal life, but also a life free from cringing fear and terrorized subservience here and now. Since, both of these were denied Dalits by all parties in their existing circumstances, the Evangelical message came as good news, and many Dalits responded accordingly and accepted the Church and the Bible as their Book of Faith and Scripture.

As the Dalit movement gained momentum, and became political, striving towards social change and political participation, it soon realized that there was no Christian theological commitment to political change at either the national or the local level. This was primarily due to the fact that the Indian church was divided along caste lines and each of the caste groups had different political interests, but more importantly, these caste groups within the church were placed in a hierarchic order. Upper caste groups within the church had more access to education and opportunities for interpreting the Bible. Hence, early theological articulations were done by upper caste Christians who did not take into account the experiences and needs and questions of the Dalits.¹ It is not that the upper caste Christians interpreted the Bible in such a way so as to divulge from it authority and legitimation for the enslavement of Dalits. Rather, they were silent. They did not address the issue of caste and gave the impression that the caste system was in no way contrary to the will of God. Today a majority of Dalits still live lives of servitude and poverty with little access to land, education or employment.

¹ There are few examples of Dalit theological articulations or biblical interpretations coming from the 19th century. Those that have been found may be examples approved by missionaries or upper caste Christians.

The Bible and Human Rights

One immediate need is to clarify the concept of human rights. Some might assume that the concept is self-explanatory and universally understood. In fact, however, the understanding of human rights has profoundly changed over the years and widely differs from society to society and even from social group to social group. Defining human rights gives rise to many of the sharpest political divisions of our time.

Human rights are based on the basic presupposition of an individual's integrity, worth and dignity. An individual is entitled to at least three kinds of personal freedom: freedom of conscience, freedom from unjust exploitation or oppression, and freedom to live a properly human life. Christian faith as based upon biblical teaching and expressed in the experience of believers through the centuries, assuredly affirms these freedoms.

Hebrew Bible:

The recognition of the importance of human life is integral to the OT faith system and the first and necessary precondition for a belief in human rights. The notion of human rights flows as a natural extension of the Genesis account of the creation of humanity. The story is cast in this way to teach the value of the worth of the individual². Every individual person is equivalent to that first human created by God. Thus, each person is of supreme value. The Genesis story enunciates two cardinal principles: the sovereignty of God and the sacredness of the individual. The second motif is underscored by the phrase, "in the image of God." Genesis teaches that human beings carry the divine stamp given by the breath of God and characterized by God's freedom. Each should be treated with the dignity attendant to that station. To kill a person or violate his/her freedom and dignity, to diminish the likeness of God—is tantamount to diminishing the reality of God's own self³. The Torah account of the creation of humanity and the tradition of commentary upon it are insistent upon the absolute sanctity of the individual. God's creating an individual person serves to undergird the belief that all people are equal. None of us can claim superiority over another⁴. All of us are children of *Adam*—human and each equal to that first human. Furthermore, all of us are, in the light of this account related to one another; all of us are equally

² George Matthew Nalunnakal, "Human Rights: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," in *Struggle for Human Rights: Towards a New Humanity*, ed., I. John Mohan Razu (Nagpur: NCCI, 2001) 2.

³ Cf. also Job 31: 13-23 which states, "If I have rejected the cause of male or female slaves, when they brought a complaint against me; what then shall I do when God rises up? When He makes inquiry, what shall I answer Him? Did not He who made me in the womb make them? And did not one fashion us in the womb? For I was in terror of calamity from God, and I could not have faced His majesty."

⁴ Phyllis Bird, "'Male and Female He Created them,' Gen. 1:2b in the Context of the Priestly Account of Creation," *HTR* 74:2 (1981) 159.

descended from the same first ancestor. No one can say that his or lineage is superior to another's. All of us trace ourselves back to the same roots.⁵

In such light, subscription to the Genesis narrative connotes belief in the ultimate importance of every individual and the fundamental equality of all individuals—both essential components of human rights. It confers on all people a worth or dignity which no person or system, whether political, economic or social, can take away. This is a calling extended to all of humanity. This generous conferring of dignity and calling has its origin and basis in the free and unmerited love of God, which is at the root of all creative activity.⁶

What is important therefore is that the doctrine of creation has given rise to the affirmation of our common humanity and, eventually, also, to the notion of essential and universal human rights. Within the doctrine of creation, one can discern the contours of basic human rights. The doctrine of creation provides grounds for respect for and the right to claim life and justice—equality of access to basic life needs as well as political, economic, and cultural goods for all people. This view of creation wrought by a gracious God, with its emphasis on the sociality of human nature, provides the basis on which to formulate relationships between human persons.⁷

The not insignificant anomaly of the treatment of women aside, the Hebrew tradition has been consistent in advocating the equality of all the children of God. The motif of human equality is sounded again in the story of Noah. With the destruction of all other people, Noah becomes the new Adam, the common ancestor of all who would people the earth. In Genesis 10, the commonality underlying racial differentiation is made manifest. The sons of Noah are explicitly identified as the ancestors of the various racial groups. The story indicates an awareness of political distinctions among the various groups of humanity. But there is no escaping the lesson of their ontological equality, for they are clearly sons of one parent: they share the same blood, the same underlying humanity.⁸

The chapter hence expresses the profound consciousness of the unity of humankind, and offers an “unparalleled ecumenical vision of human reality.”⁹ It presents the human race as a family.¹⁰ The phrases “sons of” and “fathered” express the idea that all humankind known to Israel is descended from a single stock. All people are sons of Noah as well as sons of Adam.¹¹ The text therefore

⁵ Daniel F. Polish, “Judaism and Human Rights,” in *Human Rights in Religious Traditions*, ed. Arlene Swidler (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982) 42.

⁶ John Macquarrie, *The Faith of the People of God* (London: SCM, 1972) 49.

⁷ Lois Gehr Livezey, “A Christian Vision for Sexual Justice: Theological and Ethical Reflections on Violence against Women,” *In God's Image*, Vol. 10, No. (1991) 27.

⁸ Daniel F. Polish, “Judaism and Human Rights,” 43.

⁹ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982) 94.

¹⁰ John J. Scullion, *Genesis: A Commentary for Students, Teachers, and Preachers*, OTS (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992) 89.

¹¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, WBC 1 (Waco, Texas: Word, 1987) 215.

stresses the network of interrelationships among all peoples.¹² This relationship and unity is already given to humankind as a gift. The text affirms that all nations derive their historical existence from the life giving power of God and are called to be responsive to God. No nation or people is given ground or reason for being other than this one God who has formed all creatures.

Such texts have played a decisive role in the genesis of human rights and affirm in the clearest possible way the inherent dignity and the radical equality of every human being which is the ultimate basis of all human rights. Yet, these principles have not been recognized in intrinsically hierarchical societies such as India. However, it must be maintained that the Bible is not consistent in its affirmation of the dignity of the human person. It seems to affirm human dignity in the abstract, "in primal and eschatological time. But when it speaks about concrete human existence in history, the Bible not only acknowledges the presence of inequality and oppression in a human history colored by sin, but seems to condone it and even encourage it".¹³

Evident in the historic saga of the Exodus one might discern Israel's vision of human rights and humanity.¹⁴ As a story of deliverance from oppression, the birth of freedom, and the divine sanction of human rights and responsibilities, the exodus story has served as a paradigm for over two and half millennia. The Exodus is paradigmatic in every generation and every circumstance for those engaged in eradicating human oppression and bringing salvation in the temporal horizon¹⁵. The story is about God's intervention in the life of Israel to reclaim and reinstate the image of God inherent in the Hebrew slaves that was tarnished and subdued by the Pharaoh. Yet, the settlement in Canaan is presented unambiguously as a devastating conquest. The land is given to Israel by the forcible displacement of at several different indigenous communities. (Exodus 3:8) Israel is instructed to drive out (Numbers 33:55) and destroy them (Deuteronomy 7:2). What then are the rights of these people? Do they have any before YHWH? The answer seems to be "no," for it is YHWH the creator who disposes absolutely of the lives and possessions of all peoples (cf. Deut chapter 2ff which describes YHWH as the distributor of land).¹⁶

The commitment to the equality of all people may seem, on superficial reflection, to be also at odds with another of the theological premises of Israel, namely the ideal of election. At first glance, election might seem to indicate a privileged place among the family of nations for the Jewish people—a status of manifest

¹² Only names are in fact listed. No clue is given to determine the territory further nor is there any indication of the relationship to each other of the peoples named.

¹³ George M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Bible as Magna Carta of Movements for Liberation and Human Rights," *Concilium*, no. 1 (1995) 88.

¹⁴ George Matthew Nalunnakal, "Human Rights: A Biblical and Theological Perspective," 4.

¹⁵ Roland Hendel, "The Exodus in Biblical Memory," *JBL* 120, No. 4 (2001) 621.

¹⁶ George M. Soares-Prabhu, "The Bible as Magna Carta of Movements for Liberation and Human Rights," 89.

inequality. Yet, the major stream of the Biblical tradition itself has not understood election in that light. Election should not be confused with superiority.¹⁷

According to normative Jewish understanding, God charged the Jews to perform a special task—but did not ascribe to them special merit. Thus, Israel could understand God to bless it alongside its historic adversaries.

On that day Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the Lord of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage” (Isaiah 19: 24-25)¹⁸.

Amos too, addressed the question of election and reported God as proclaiming the more universal vision of equality for all humanity.

Are you not like the Ethiopians to me, O people of Israel? says the Lord. Did I not bring Israel up from the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and Arameans from Kir? (Amos 9:7).

But texts such as those cited above are few and some may find it problematic to arrive at a conclusion that claims YHWH's universal concern.¹⁹ It therefore seems to be inappropriate to ascribe the modern notion of “human rights” to the Bible. The Bible seems to be more concerned with “duties” rather than “rights.” Paul Sieghart cites Hain Cohn, a Justice of the Supreme Court of Israel who claims that “the particular structures of Jewish law *qua* religious laws...postulates a system of duties rather than a system of rights”.²⁰

The duties outlined in the OT laws were given in the Desert, an area that belonged to no one and yet an area that belongs to all, and hence it has been suggested that the Torah is the property of all and not just of the Israelites.²¹ The last five stipulations of the Decalogue which are an individual's duties towards others in the community, which could also function as a bill of rights, express sanctity for human life and the need for the protection of human dignity and worth. Life, which is essentially a gift from God is a treasured possession and needs to be safeguarded.²² The right to life (Exodus 20: 13), the right to one's possessions (Exodus 20: 15, 17) and the right to a good name (Exodus 20:16) are mandatory and unconditional. The social concern for the poor and the needy, the most vulnerable in society reflected in the Deuteronomic version of the Sabbath (Deuteronomy 5:15), and the call to observe the Jubilee year (Leviticus

¹⁷ Daniel F. Polish, “Judaism and Human Rights,” 44.

¹⁸ NRSV

¹⁹ Cf. George M. Soares-Prabhu, “The Bible as Magna Carta of Movements for Liberation and Human Rights,” 96, fn. 17.

²⁰ Paul Sieghart, “Christianity and Human Rights,” *The Month* 150 (1989) 49 as cited by George M. Soares-Prabhu, “The Bible as Magna Carta of Movements for Liberation and Human Rights,” 89.

²¹ Daniel F. Polish, “Judaism and Human Rights,” 44.

²² Cf. further, George Matthew Nalunnakal, “Human Rights: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” 5ff.

25) was actually instituted for the sake of those in debt, the slaves rest for the land also indicate some of the responsibilities of the community.²³ These and many of the prophetic oracles that emphasize the needs of the poor and the needy and condemn the exploitation of the poor (Hosea 10: 4, 11-15; 12:5; Amos 2:6; 5:11; Isaiah 5:23; Micah 6:5-8) reveal God's concern and total identification and solidarity with the poor (Job 29:16, Psalm 68:5, Ecc 4:10; Isa 22:21).

Such communal practice reflect an attitude that attending to such needs of the poor is an act not of beneficence but of concern, to which the poor and the marginalized are rightfully entitled to on account of their situation. Only through the institution of such practices can the poor and the oppressed gain access to that which God has provided for all. The idea of economic rights therefore does have precedence in the teaching and practice of Old Testament faith.

New Testament:

Many theologians, scripture scholars, and Christian philosophers have convincingly argued that "freedom" is a primary code word of the New Testament.²⁴ In his person and his teaching, Jesus was the Liberator! God send God's son into the world as a human being who pitched his tent among the people (John 1:14). The circumstances in which he was born, his life and his death are a testimony to God's concern and love for the world. God is present in this love. God Godself mediated through God's act of creation and the saving life and death of God's son Jesus Christ ensures that all individuals are equal, redeemed and worthy to be called children of God. As Altmann writes, it is not difficult therefore to make linkages between God's love and grace and the indisputable value of every human being.

... grace radicalizes respect for human dignity, in that it attributes this dignity to the free will of God and not to nature. Over against the multiplicity of ideological and social claims such as production and property, culture and property, culture and power, the valuing of the human being for what he or she is, even and especially in deficiency, weakness, impotence, and marginality, returns us to the path that leads to Jesus of Nazareth, born in a stable and killed on a cross.²⁵

The liberation and grace wrought in the saving presence, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is therefore available to all, for in Christ there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free, male nor female (Galatians 3:28).

²³ Sharon H. Ringe, *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) 15-25.

²⁴ J. Robert Nelson, "Human Rights in Creation and Redemption: A Protestant View," in *Human Rights in Religious Traditions*, ed. Arlene Swidler (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982) 1.

²⁵ Walter Altmann, *Luther and Liberation: A Latin American Perspective*, trans. Mary M. Solberg (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 41.

This affirmation and equality of human dignity is best expressed in Jesus' interpretation of what it means to be created in the image of God, which according to him is to love God and to reenact God's love for humanity. Loving God requires that we care for and love our neighbors. Our love for God with all our hearts, with all our souls and with all our minds is manifested when the beneficiary of our love is able to say,

...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me (Matthew 25: 35-36).

We, the instruments of God's love and mercy are to remember the words of Jesus Christ, "...just as you did it to the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me" (Matthew 25: 40).

Hence, Jesus also affirmed the concern for the socially powerless and the weak through his words, life and ministry and impressed upon humanity the need to further this, which is understood as the love and reign of God that is seeking to break into our world. But our inaptitude and apathy and our failure to respond and address the needs of the marginalized and confront the structures of power and wealth that increase the vulnerability of the poor hinder this.

An emphasis on the affirmation of the equality of all human persons, the call to accompany the poor in their struggles as members of the human race created in the image of God, and a commitment to the responsibility and accountability that such an accompanying would require are the lessons we learn from the Bible.

Conclusion

This sacredness and equality of the human person (Genesis 1:26-28; 10; Gal 3:28) and the concern for others in the community (as reflected in the laws, the prophetic oracles, and Jesus' ministry) are two major pillars of the Biblical tradition upon which one can base both political rights (freedom) and social rights (bread). We need to maintain both civil liberty and social justice as inseparable parts of human rights. As we cannot divide spirit and flesh in our body, so freedom and bread are integral to each other. If we lose one, we will distort all. The real issue is not of counterpoising these two sets of rights and making a choice between them, but of finding an acceptable working arrangement. The poor person needs both bread and freedom.

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