

HUMAN RIGHTS, REASON AND DIVINE REVELATION

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INTRODUCTOIN: A PARABLE

Ed is a maintenance man for a 40-floor, high-rise tower block, where he goes to work every day. Meanwhile, at home, he is building an extension to his house. Before going home at the end of each day, he goes down into the underground basement of the tower block and chisels out 3 or 4 bricks, puts them in his bag, and goes home, and he uses the bricks on his house extension, and in this way he saves a bit of money. This has been going on for a few months, when big cracks appear high up in the building. The engineers are called and they discover significant and dangerous undermining of the foundations.

Our theme in this paper is about foundations; not foundations of a building, but foundations for human rights, and the role of reason and revelation in those foundations.

WHAT ARE HUMAN RIGHTS?

Rights are co-relative to obligations - to every right there is a corresponding obligation:

You have a right to my doing X to you, if I have an obligation to do X to you.

You have a right to my refraining from doing Y to you, if I have an obligation to refrain from doing Y to you.

Yale University philosopher, Nicholas Wolterstorff, provides the following definitions:

I think of justice as constituted of rights: a society is just insofar as its members enjoy the goods to which they have a right. And I think of rights as ultimately grounded in what respect for the worth of persons and human beings requires.¹

Theologian, John Stott states:

Human rights describe the kind of life a human being should be able to expect by virtue of being human, rather than rights which people may have by virtue of being citizens of a country or having signed a contract for sale, which are special human rights.²

The concept of human rights recognises that for me to live the good life, the flourishing life, it does not depend on me alone, but also on the actions, and restraints from actions, of others towards me. Human rights are based on the worth of a person, and therefore the respect that person is due on account of being human. Conversely, to wrong a human being is to treat them in a way that is disrespectful of their worth. Wolterstorff writes,

I will argue that it is on account of her worth that the other comes into my presence bearing legitimate claims against me as to how I treat her. The rights of the other against me are actions and restraints from action that due respect for her worth requires of me. To fail to treat her as she has a right to my treating her is to demean her, to treat her as if

¹. Wolterstorff, Nicholas, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs*, Princeton University Press (Location 295), (Kindle edition), 2008.

². Stott, John, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 4th Edition, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2006, p. 189.

she had less worth than she does. To spy on her for prurient reasons, to insult her, to torture her, to bad-mouth her, is to demean her.³

HUMAN RIGHTS TALK

While having many antecedents in previous centuries, articulation of human rights developed in the 20th Century, a milestone being reached with the 1948 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights⁴, in the wake of the horrors of two world wars. Although the participants who formulated and ratified the UN Declaration of Human Rights came from a wide variety of religious and philosophical backgrounds, the document itself, along with continuing development of discussion around human rights, is not without controversy. In particular, the suspicion endures that the concept of human rights emerged and belongs to highly individualistic societies and expresses possessive individualism⁵.

In response, it can be said that rights are not just about how you treat me, but also about how I treat you. Wolterstorff argues,

The situation is entirely symmetrical. Rights and the recognition of rights, including natural rights, has nothing to do with possessive individualism.... An ethos of possessive individualism distorts our ways of dealing

³. op. cit., Wolterstorff, 2008, p. 5.

⁴. <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

⁵. In contrast, see The Organisation for Islamic Cooperation's (OIC) 1990 'Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam.'

<https://www.fmreview.org/sites/fmr/files/FMRdownloads/en/FMRpdfs/Human-Rights/cairo.pdf>

with rights – not the rights themselves but our ways of dealing with them. Instead of being as sensitive to your rights as I am to my own, I stridently claim my own rights and ride rough-shod over yours.⁶

Another charge against human rights talk is that what is presented as ‘universal’ human rights, is often a Western secular vision of human rights. Divergent visions of human flourishing and consequent human rights jostle for position within the West as well as between the West and other cultures of the world. British Christian writer, Roy McCloughry, has said,

If God has not given something as a right, then it cannot be claimed as a right and it is this that may cause Christians to be at odds with those who root human rights in the Western ideal of the autonomous individual who has freedom to choose their own goals.⁷

In a similar vein, Muslim scholar, Maria Massi Dakake writes,

Islamic ethics and social norms are often judged in relation to modern Western notions of ethics and human rights, which in recent centuries have been dominated philosophically by secular and individualistic perspectives and have come, in the last century, to be seen in the West as synonymous with ‘universal’ ethical norms or ‘universal’ standards of human rights. Although Islamic ethical norms have much in common with those of Christianity and other traditional cultures, they also

⁶. op. cit., Wolterstorff, 2008, p. 385.

⁷. op. cit., Stott, John, 2006, p. 199.

differ profoundly in certain key aspects from the secular formulation of these norms in the contemporary West.⁸

Finally, Seyyed Hossein Nasr offers wise words of advice:

If human rights are related to love of humanity, they must be combined with humility, not hubris ... Anything less than mutual respect in understanding the other side makes a sham of the question of human rights. And when the issue of human rights is used as a tool for policy by Western powers, it tends to nullify the efforts of those in the West who, with sincerity and good intention, are seeking to help others all over the globe to preserve the dignity of human life, a belief that not only Muslims, Christians, and those from other religions, but also many secularists have.⁹

However, although what constitutes human rights is an ongoing matter of disagreement, even more significant is the matter of a basis or a foundation for human rights, which I want to look at now.

A FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

The UN Declaration of Human Rights in its preamble declares:

⁸. Dakake, Maria Massi, *Quranic Ethics, Human Rights, and Society*, in (ed.), Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*, HarperOne, (Kindle edition), p. 1785.

⁹. Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity*, Harper, San Francisco, 2004, p. 290.

The peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women¹⁰

However, it provides no basis for this faith. Perhaps that is beyond its scope, and of course, obtaining wide agreement on a basis for human rights, dignity and worth would no doubt have proved impossible. Nevertheless, this lack of a basis is a problem. Many secular people¹¹ are very active and passionate in campaigning for human rights – often more so than religious people. But their problem is with the *why* question, with establishing an adequate foundation for human rights.

Secular notions of human rights provide no reason why humans should have rights, they do not answer the question why all humans have certain inalienable rights. Nicholas Wolterstorff comments:

Present-day discussions by philosophers about morality in general, and human rights in particular, are haunted by Nietzsche's challenge. Is it possible, without reference to God, to identify something about each and every human being that gives him or her a dignity adequate for grounding human rights?

¹⁰. <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

¹¹. I am aware that the word 'secular' and its cognates have varying connotations in different social and political contexts. I use 'secular' in this paper for people who have no religious affiliation or belief.

Wolterstorff concludes: “It is impossible to develop a secular account of human dignity adequate for grounding human rights.”¹²

If this universe has happened by chance, by an unguided set of random events, what meaning is there to life, to good and evil? If humans are the product of undirected evolutionary processes, why does it matter if the strong devour the weak? Why is a human life worth more than a monkey or a mosquito? Why should I treat another human being with respect? Why shouldn't I torture or kill him if I have the power, and if I perceive it would advance my interests to do so?

Adolf Hitler is reputed to have said, “I do not see why man should not be just as cruel as nature.” Hitler applied his brand of Social Darwinism to the extermination of Jews, Gypsies, disabled people and others. The fittest survived, and those deemed unworthy of survival perished violently. If there is no God, then there is no ultimate standard of right and wrong, good and evil, and there is no basis for refuting Hitler's position. As Fyodor Dostoyevsky wrote: “Without God and the future life ... everything is permitted, one can do anything.”¹³ Islamic scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes:

In today's world everyone speaks of human rights and the sacred character of human life, and many secularists even claim that they are the true champions of human rights as against those who accept various religious worldviews.

¹². op. cit., Wolterstorff, 2008, pp. 324-25.

¹³. Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, *The Brothers Karamazov*, quoted in Keller, Timothy, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, John Murray Press, (Kindle edition), 2016, p. 177.

But strangely enough, often those same champions of humanity believe that human beings are *nothing more* than evolved apes, who in turn evolved from lower life forms and ultimately from various compounds of molecules. If the human being is *nothing but* the result of 'blind forces' acting upon the original cosmic soup of molecules, then is not the very statement of the sacredness of human life intellectually meaningless and nothing but a hollow sentimental expression? Is not human dignity nothing more than a conveniently contrived notion without basis in reality? And if we are *nothing but* highly organized inanimate particles, what is the basis to claims of 'human rights'?¹⁴

If, on the other hand, there is a God, One God, who possesses the attributes recognised in the Abrahamic faiths, a God who is eternal, infinite, the Maker and Owner of the entire universe, including every human being, a God whose own character and actions are consistently and perfectly just, righteous and good, and who requires that we, his human creation, be just, righteous and good - if there is such a God, then there is a universal reference point for right and wrong, for good and evil, there is an ultimate authority for morality and ethics, an ultimate bar of appeal for justice. Essential also is that this God has revealed to humans the purpose of human life and how humans are to fulfil that purpose, and also that God will one day call humans to account.

Polytheism does not provide this basis because of rivalry among the gods. Atheism does not provide it, because if there is no God,

¹⁴. op. cit., Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, 2004, (emphasis mine), p. 275.

there is no ultimate authority to appeal to, just many, often conflicting, human authorities. Richard Dawkins, Britain's most well-known atheist, cites studies which found that most people from different parts of the world, with varying religious beliefs or none, have similar moral principles, with variations only in minor details. He concludes from this that people do not need God in order to be good.¹⁵

The problem is that people aren't always good. And individuals or societies might deviate from what one considers are moral norms. What is more, they may give justifications for these deviations - "these people are sub-human", "they are evolutionarily inferior and due to die out; it's the survival of the fittest", or Adolf Hitler's, "I do not see why man should not be just as cruel as nature."

When people say these kind of things, what basis do we have for saying they are wrong? If there is no ultimate authority, no ultimate court of appeal, no God, then it is simply their opinion against mine, and there is no means of arbitration, no means of deciding what is truly right and wrong. I remember a conversation I once had with a young man at a wedding. He told me he didn't believe in God but believed strongly in feminism. I said to him, 'Men are on average physically stronger than women. Why according to your world-view shouldn't men abuse and be violent towards women?' He had no answer beyond that that was his strongly held opinion. Timothy Keller puts it like this:

¹⁵ Dawkins, Richard, *The God Delusion* (Black Swan, London, 2006), pp. 254-58. The New Testament/Injil accounts for this similarity in morals across diverse peoples by stating that the requirements of God's law are written on the hearts and consciences of all people (Romans 2:14-15) - whether they recognise the source of that law or not.

Anyone can say, 'feel this is right to do, and so that is how I will act.' The 'moral source' in this case is a feeling within. However, on the secular view of reality, how can anyone ever say to anyone else, 'This is right (or wrong) for you to do, whether you feel it or not'? You can never say that to someone else unless there is a moral source outside them that they must honour. If there is an omniscient, omnipotent, infinitely good God, he himself, or his law, could be that moral source. If there is no God, however, it creates a great problem in that there doesn't appear to be an alternative moral source that exists outside of our inner feelings and intuitions. Therefore, while there can be moral feelings and convictions without God, it doesn't appear that there can be moral obligation—objective, moral "facts" that exist whether you feel them or not.¹⁶

But if there is a God, a God as described or revealed in the Abrahamic tradition, a God who is just, righteous, all-seeing, all-knowing; One whose supreme worth and excellence are based on his eternity, his infiniteness and his underived-ness; a God who created all things, who is their rightful Owner and Lord, and who holds all accountable - then there is a sure foundation for concepts of right and wrong, good and evil, justice, and indeed, for human rights.

In addition to a theistic world-view, an adequate basis for human rights requires a view of human dignity and worth. A world-view

¹⁶ Keller, Timothy, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, John Murray Press, (Kindle edition), 2016, pp. 177-78.

which recognised a Creator God but held that humans possessed no intrinsic value would not provide a sufficient basis for human rights. Conversely, for humans to have true worth, that worth must be grounded somewhere. If you remove the foundation from the tower-block, you are heading for trouble! Wolterstorff writes,

An option that is not available is holding that there are natural rights inherent to a worth possessed by all human beings, but that this worth has no ground, no properties or relationships on which it supervenes. That makes no sense. Worth cannot just float free; always there has to be something that gives the entity such worth as it has, some property, achievement, or relationship on which its worth supervenes.¹⁷

We will deal with the grounds of human worth which form a basis for human rights in the next section.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

I want to present a theistic basis for human rights from a Christian perspective.¹⁸ Most of what I say, however, will be based on material from the Holy Scriptures, and in particular the Torah, which in my view are the shared Scriptures and heritage of

¹⁷. *op. cit.*, Wolterstorff, 2008, p. 341.

¹⁸. A number of Muslim scholars have argued for a theistic basis for human rights, finding sources in the Qur'an, the *Hadith* and the *Sirah* of the Prophet. See Qadri, Muhammad Tahir ul-, *Peace, Integration and Human Rights*, Minhaj ul-Quran Publications, London, 2010; Dakake, Maria Massi, *Quranic Ethics, Human Rights, and Society* (ed.), *op. cit.*, Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, 2015, pp. 1785-1804.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam.¹⁹ Particular attention will be paid to the creation narrative in the Torah, in Genesis 1-2, and the ground it provides for human dignity and equality and human rights. A key passage is the account of the creation of humankind.

*Then God said, 'Let us make humankind²⁰ in our image, according to our likeness. Let them rule over the fish in the sea, over the birds in the sky, over the animals and over all the earth, and over everything that moves on the earth.' So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, and over all the land animals.'*²¹

This passage is set within the account of creation in Genesis (1:1-2:3). The narrative is arranged in a seven-day pattern with creation taking place over a six-day period²². On the sixth day, God created all kinds of land animals, and then humankind. The fact that the day is the same suggests the creatureliness of

¹⁹. See the Qur'an's testimony regarding the earlier books in, for example, *Āl-Imrān* (3:3-4, 84), *An-Nisā'* (4:136), *Al-Mā'idah* (5:46-47, 68). See Saeed, Abdullah, 'How Muslims view the Scriptures of the People of the Book: Towards a Reassessment', chapter 10 in *Religion and Ethics in a Globalizing World: Conflict, Dialogue, and Transformation*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, (Kindle edition).

²⁰. The word I have translated 'humankind' is actually *ādām* in the original Hebrew text. This is the name of the first man: Adam. In Hebrew, the word can also refer to an individual human being or to humanity as a race. I will alternate between 'humankind' and 'humans'.

²¹. Genesis 1:26-28 (my translation). A helpful treatment of this passage can be found in Macleod, Donald, *A Faith to Live By: Understanding Christian Doctrine*, CFP, Fearn, Ross-shire, 2002, pp. 95-106.

²². Whether these 'days' were intended to be understood literally or otherwise need not detain us here.

humans. We are not utterly distinct from the rest of creation, we are creatures along with them, and so we share many affinities and are similar in many ways. However, what the account emphasises is what makes humankind distinct from the rest of creation, and this is highlighted in the description of God's creating humans.

GOD'S IMAGE AND LIKENESS

God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness'

Humans are not God, or the same as God, but in some ways, they reflect God, just as what you see in a mirror is not you, but a reflection of you. Only humans are said to be made in God's image and likeness. This concept is not alien to Islam. Surah *al-Baqarah*, 2:30 refers to Prophet Adam as *khalifah*, often translated 'vicegerent'²³. But what does it mean to be made in the image and likeness of God? It is connected to ruling: '*Let them rule over the fish in the sea, over the birds in the sky, over the animals and over all the earth, and over everything that moves on the earth.*' But this rule is the consequence, not the content of their being made in the image/likeness of God. The force of the statement is, 'Let us make

²³ op. cit., Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (ed.), 2015, p. 21. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'an*, IDCI, Birmingham, 2007. Seyyed Hossein Nasr speaks of humans beings made in the "image or "form" of God, op. cit., Nasr, Seyyed Hossein, 2004, p. 303. Muhammad Tahir ul-Qadri writes, "The divine revelation expounded the dignity of the human being and his esteemed position above the rest of creation". He then quotes Qur'an (17:70), "And we have indeed ennobled the children of Adam". Qadri, Muhammad Tahir ul-, *Peace, Integration and Human Rights*, Minhaj ul-Quran Publications, London, 2010.

humankind in our image... so that they may rule...' So it is the capacity to rule not the exercising of that rule.

Arguably, being made in the image and likeness of God includes everything in humans that is distinct from other creatures and that corresponds in some way to what God is like. In particular, we can identify the following attributes of human beings in the surrounding narrative.

A SPIRITUAL BEING

In Genesis (1:28) we read, "God said *to* them..." Already Genesis has identified God as a speaking Being. He speaks things into existence. But here, for the first time, God speaks directly *to* some part of his creation. He speaks *to* these humans. This tells us much about ourselves. Humans were made to hear God speak and understand what He says. And humans were given the ability to respond by speaking back.

God's speaking to these first humans tells us that we alone, as humans, are made for special relationship with God. He has made us with the potential to hear His voice, to receive His revelation. And God has made us with the ability to respond back in prayer and worship. We are loved by God and called to respond in love to him. In other words, humans are spiritual beings. We are religious beings with an awareness of our Maker. Of course, in our present state, that awareness can be suppressed or distorted, but it is nonetheless there.

A little further on in the Torah, in Genesis (5:1-3), we read:

When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God. Male and female he created them, and he blessed them, and he named them 'humankind' when they were created.

When Adam was 130 years old, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth.

This tells us that being in the image and likeness of someone includes the idea of son-ship. Prophet Adam, and by extension, the whole of humanity, are children of God by virtue of the fact that we are all made in the image and likeness of God. This is clearly not a physical, biological son-ship, because Adam was created by God from the earth, and Adam's offspring all had human fathers. A clear distinction is made in Genesis 5 between God and Adam in the verbs that are used. In v1, God create (ברא / *bārā'*) mankind, and makes (אָשָׂה / *'āsāh*) them, whereas in v3, Adam has or begets (יָלַד / *yālad*) a son²⁴.

A SOCIAL BEING

We are also created for relationship with other humans. '*... in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them*'. This tells us that male and female is the fundamental distinction within the human race, and also that male and female humans, whatever distinguishes them from each other, are equally dignified as being made in God's image. Of course, other animals are also male and female, but it is only specifically mentioned of humans. In Genesis 2, we have a second parallel and complimentary account of creation, in which we are told that in

²⁴ It is thus not necessary to see a contradiction here between the Torah and the Qur'an, when the latter asserts that God 'begets not, nor was He begotten' *Surah Al-Ikhlās* (112:3).

all God's creation which he had pronounced 'good', there was one thing that was not good:

The LORD God said, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."²⁵

God proceeds to make woman. He institutes marriage with the words,

For this reason, a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh.²⁶

But she is also the solution to his alone-ness. Humans are created social beings.²⁷

²⁵. Genesis 2:18

²⁶. Genesis 2:24. See also Qur'an, *Al-A'raf* (7:189), "It is He (*Allah*) Who created you from a single person and made his mate of like nature, in order that he might dwell with her (in love)."

²⁷. In relation to this, God uses plural pronouns in creating humans: 'Let us make humankind in our image...' Unlike English, Arabic and some other languages, Hebrew does not have a 'majestic' plural where a singular person or being uses the plural form, so it is noteworthy that the One Creator God speaks using the plural form when creating humans. Some have suggested that God is speaking to the angels, but angels do not appear anywhere in this creation account, and angels are nowhere said to be co-creators with God. Many Christian commentators see a suggestion here of plurality within the One God, developed in later Scripture and in Christian tradition, and that humans as communal beings reflect community within the One God. See for example, Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (I.13.24, I.15.3), (ed.), McNiell, John T., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1960. Letham, Robert, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology and Worship*, P & R, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2004, p. 19-21. Macleod, Donald, *A Faith to Live By: Understanding Christian Doctrine*, CFP, Fearn, Ross-shire, 2002, p. 51.

A MORAL BEING

In the creation account of Genesis 2, we read:

*And the LORD God commanded the man: 'You may eat from every tree in the garden. But you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.'*²⁸

The fruit of this tree was a sign or symbol for Adam. It reminded him that God is the One who decides what is good, and what is evil. This tree represented God's moral authority. If Adam were to eat from this tree, as indeed he does go on to do, he would be disobeying God's command. That would mean that Adam was rejecting God's authority, appointing himself as the one who decided what was good and what was evil for him, declaring his autonomy from God.

Adam, and later Eve, were created perfect. They were part of God's original creation which God said was 'very good'.²⁹ But God created humans with a will - to choose obedience to God, or disobedience. God is the supreme moral Being. He is good and righteous, and He made humans moral beings. He made humans upright, uniquely like God in that they have awareness of right and wrong. He also made humans with a free will, with real choice to choose good or evil.

²⁸. Genesis 2:16-17.

²⁹. Genesis 1:31.

CREATED TO RULE

In Genesis 1:26, 28, God gives humans the task of ruling over the rest of creation.

'... Let them rule over the fish in the sea, over the birds in the sky, over the animals and over all the earth, and over everything that moves on the earth.'... God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase in number, fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, and over all the land animals.'

God is the supreme Ruler over His creation, but he delegates rule to humans. Adam is a *khalifah*.³⁰ Douglas and Jonathan Moo put it well, that, the image of God means being placed into a particular set of relationships with God, each other, and the rest of creation, for the purpose of ruling as his royal representatives.³¹

Ancient Egyptian and Assyrian texts describe the king as the image of God³². The Torah extends this to every human being, male and female. Our task of ruling over and subduing the earth is expressed in many different activities such as farming, building, arts, science, technology, education and study. The command to subdue the earth should not be taken as a *carte blanche* to exploit, pollute and destroy the earth. In Genesis 2:15, we are told:

³⁰. Qur'an, *Surah Al-Baqarah* (2:30).

³¹. Moo, Douglas J, & Moo, Jonathan A, *Creation Care: A Biblical Theology of the Natural World*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2018, p. 74.

³². Wenham, Gordon J, *Word Bible Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, Word, Waco, Texas, 1987, p. 30.

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.

The Hebrew word translated 'work' is עָבַד / *abad*, which can also mean serve, and the word שָׁמַר / *shamar* translated 'take care' has the connotation of guarding, keeping, preserving and protecting.³³ So the human relationship to the rest of creation should be one of careful stewardship. Wolterstorff identifies a difficulty: if being made in the image of God to a large extent involves the capacity to rule over the rest of creation, where does that leave small children, those with dementia or other serious mental impairments? Are they outside the category of 'made in God's image'? His solution is that even in the case of those humans who never have the capacity to exercise dominion, they still have human nature.

And that nature is such that the mature and properly formed possessors of that nature resemble God with respect to their capacities for exercising dominion... Something may have gone awry with human nature in one's own case, so that one lacks those capacities; but one does not, on that account, lack human nature.³⁴

It could be added that to some extent, even young children and the mentally impaired can exercise dominion. A toddler might paint a picture, an elderly person with dementia tap out a rhythm and sing along. Even the most intelligent non-human species do not engage in these kinds of activities. Jesus the Messiah, quoting Psalm 8, once said,

³³. op. cit., Moo, Douglas J, & Moo, Jonathan A, 2018, p. 78.

³⁴. op. cit., Wolterstorff, 2008, p. 350.

From the lips of children and infants, you, Lord, have called forth your praise.³⁵

This seems to indicate that even pre-weaned children (the literal meaning of ‘infants’) are spiritual beings with the capacity to worship their Maker.

HUMAN WORTH AND DIGNITY

Even a cursory reading of the creation accounts in Genesis 1-2 will leave the reader with the impression that human beings are distinct and special, part of creation but also the apex of God’s creation. Later Scripture, referring back to the creation account, sees humans as possessing great worth because they are made in the image and likeness of the Being of infinite worth, namely God.

In Genesis 9:5-6, after the flood, God says to the Prophet Noah and his sons:

And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each human being, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of another human being.

Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind.

This is significant, because the context of God’s statement here is after the ‘Fall’ as a result of the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and after the human race has sunk deep into corruption and

³⁵. Matthew 21:16, *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, Biblica, 2011.

violence, where God states that, *'every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood.'*³⁶ This passage declares the sanctity of human life. Murder is so serious that death is to be meted out as punishment. And the reason given is because God has made humankind in the image of God. The prohibition against murder is grounded in the worth of a human being, regardless of age, race, ability or any other distinguishing feature.

In the New Testament (*injl*), humans being made in God's likeness is invoked in James 3:9-10:

With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.

James exposes the incongruity of praising God and cursing human beings, because humans are made in God's likeness. Being made in God's likeness bestows great worth on any and every human being, such that to curse someone is to demean that worth. Again, this applies to all human beings without qualification. Here is Wolterstorff again on the connection between human worth and human rights:

From our discussion of rights there emerged a fundamental principle of action: one should never treat persons or human beings as if they had less worth than they do have; one should never treat them with under-respect, never demean them. Once this principle is formulated and held up for attention, it occurs to us that

³⁶. Genesis 8:21, *The Holy Bible*, New International Version, Biblica, 2011.

it is but an application of the more general principle that one should never treat anything whatsoever as of less worth than it is.³⁷

OUTWORKING IN LATER SCRIPTURES

Subsequent Scripture is full of concern for justice and in particular, the rights³⁸ of the most vulnerable in society – widows, orphans, the poor and foreigners. Often it is the prophets who confront the Israelites, and their kings, with their failure to live up to God’s requirements of justice and righteousness.³⁹ In fact, it was against the background of the failure of Israel’s kings to rule with justice and righteousness that the hope developed of the eschatological Messianic king who would *reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever.*⁴⁰

Space does not permit a survey of later Scripture, nor of the teaching of Jesus the Messiah on justice and rights. Suffice for now that Jesus the Messiah extended the obligation to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’⁴¹ to loving even one’s enemies:

³⁷. op. cit., Wolterstorff, 2008, p. 370.

³⁸. Under 2, ‘Definitions...’ above, I quote Nicholas Wolterstorff for a brief working definition of justice and rights, “I think of justice as constituted of rights: a society is just insofar as its members enjoy the goods to which they have a right. And I think of rights as ultimately grounded in what respect for the worth of persons and human beings requires”.

³⁹. An excellent survey can be found in Wright, Christopher J. H., *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*, Inter Varsity Press, Leicester, 2004, pp. 253-80.

⁴⁰. Isaiah 9:7 (my translation). See also Luke 1:32-33.

⁴¹. Mark 12:28-31.

*But I say this to you who are listening: love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ill-treat you.*⁴²

In relation to an enemy who has wronged me, I have a duty to forgive, but he does not have a right to be forgiven. However, if God (speaking through the Messiah, Jesus) has commanded me to forgive and love my enemies, I have an obligation to God to do that, and it is God who has the right to me obeying him by forgiving and loving my enemies.⁴³

CONCLUSION

Human rights are rooted in the dignity and worth of every human being. But where does that worth come from? It cannot be free floating – we cannot say human beings have great worth ... because human beings have great worth. Human worth must be based on something. Secular world-views, with their dismissal of God, do not provide an adequate basis for human worth and human rights. By contrast, a theistic world-view, as presented in the Torah, with its view that human beings are made in the image of God, the Being of ultimate and infinite worth, provides a firm foundation for human dignity and rights.

⁴². Luke 6:27-28 (my translation). See also the famous 'Parable of the Good Samaritan' in Luke 10:25-37.

⁴³. op. cit., Wolterstorff, 2008, pp. 383-84.

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