

Putting God to rights: a theological reflection on human rights

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Contents

Poverty is an outrage against humanity. It robs people of dignity, freedom and hope, of power over their own lives.

Christian Aid has a vision – an end to poverty – and we believe that vision can become a reality. We urge you to join us.

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Christian Aid is a member of

actalliance

Cover: Bokiya (r) was 13 years old when her family told her she was to marry her sister's elderly widower. With help from Elema (l) the marriage was prevented. Both now work to change the minds of their community in Yabello, Ethiopia, with our partner HUNDEE, which runs group meetings teaching people their rights.

Photos: front and back pages: Christian Aid/M Gonzalez-Noda; page 3: Christian Aid/Jo Rogers; page 4: Christian Aid / Madeleine McGivern; page 5: Christian Aid/Sian Curry; page 7: Christian Aid/Charlotte Marshall; page 9: Christian Aid/Tabitha Ross; page 12: Christian Aid; page 15: Christian Aid/Paula Plaza; page 16: Christian Aid/Sarah Filbey; page 19: Christian Aid/Ally Carnwath; page 21: Christian Aid/Matthew Gonzalez-Noda

Introduction

At Christian Aid, we say that we have a 'rights-based approach' to our work and we believe that work to strengthen human rights is work to overcome poverty. We want to see the human rights of all people upheld, and we recognise that there is still much work to do in achieving this. We say, for example:

'All human beings are born with equal and inalienable rights and fundamental freedoms, yet, more than sixty years on after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the struggle for these principles to be universal continues.'¹

Among our partners, APRODEV (now ACT Alliance EU), published a paper in 2013 on development and religion, which urges that human rights are consistent with biblical perspectives while recognising that human rights are not, of course, owned only by Christians.²

The Young Women's Christian Association has said, 'that each of us, everywhere, at all times, is entitled to the full range of human rights, that human rights belong equally to each of us and bind us together as a global community with the same ideals and values.'³

The World Council of Churches, since its inception, has also consistently used the language of human rights in its work for justice and peace.

But behind this confident rhetoric there lies a more complex reality. In a Christian Aid paper of 2010, we acknowledged that:

'It is probably true to say that many Christians, as well as many non-Christians, are hostile to the whole idea of human rights.'⁴

The language of human rights is increasingly contested and controversial, within the world of international development⁵ but also within the churches and within other faith communities. This becomes particularly



Jwan Latif, a psychologist working for our partner Asuda, talks to a woman at risk of so-called 'honour killing'. Asuda works in northern Iraq, promoting women's rights.

evident when people from these different worlds meet. For organisations like Christian Aid there are sometimes difficult conversations with partners and supporters, sometimes awkward silences as we fear to expose deep seated difference or disagreement, and sometimes projects where we find ourselves acting as a mediator between human rights defenders and faith leaders. There are fears on the one hand that a readiness to question human rights language (its legitimacy, foundations or usefulness) might leave us without an adequate defence against some of the causes of poverty and without shared commitments that can help us overcome it. On the other hand there are fears that relying so much on what some see as the secular, individualistic and Western discourse of human rights leaves us disconnected from our faith roots. For Christian Aid and among those with whom we work, this tension is often unresolved.

This paper aims to surface the tension, to explore what lies behind it and to ask whether a more open and positive conversation might be possible. Christian Aid chair Rowan Williams has referred to 'a certain feeling in some quarters that there is a tension between rights and religious belief',⁶ but he argues that this tension need not be as serious as it might seem. This paper represents an exploration of some ways in which that tension might

be recognised and turned to good, from the particular experience and perspective of a Christian agency for international development.

Andrew Clapham's *A Very Short Introduction to Human Rights* reveals that controversy about human rights is not unknown even outside of the world of faith-based development. He writes:

'For some, invoking human rights is a heartfelt, morally justified demand to rectify all sorts of injustice; for others it is no more than a slogan to be treated with suspicion, or even hostility.'⁷

But this tension emerges in particular ways as people of faith seek to make common cause with all who are struggling for justice for those living in poverty. Sometimes it seems that it is only that people use different vocabulary: one person will talk of 'rights' while another speaks of 'dignity'. But sometimes profound disagreements emerge about what it is that we are struggling for and what counts as a good for all people (in debates about gender justice, for example). Sometimes people fear what seems to them a very alien sounding language and sometimes people hear in the language that others use the echoes of a culture that has colonised and harmed their own. For some, human rights are non-negotiable statements of all that represents the good and best foundations of hope in an increasingly broken and challenged world, while for others they seem like assertions of what they most fear about modernity and globalisation.

In discussions of this tension, some commentators want to smooth over the differences by identifying common roots and common aims, as though the differences are only perceived and hardly important, and any tension readily resolved. Others want to raise the stakes and speak of a deep-rooted incompatibility between the language and framework of human rights and the language of human dignity, or between secular and sacred.

What might it mean for those who treasure the language of human rights to engage fully in conversation with those who treasure the language of faith, and vice versa? How could each help the other to see what is really at stake, for the sake of the world and, above all, for the sake of those living in poverty? It may be that these different, and sometimes apparently competing, languages are each able to highlight truths and insights that the other hides.

This paper will explore and highlight the most positive and compelling contributions of both the human rights language and the language of faith. It will then, in turn, outline some of the critiques that have been made, each of the other. There will be reflection on these positive and critical themes from the perspective of Christian Aid's experience and then some suggestions for further conversation and reflection.



Hassan is head of the village fishing association in Muhatara in Minia, Egypt, which supports fisherfolk and their families to claim their economic and social rights.

A conversation

'Face to face with people who are living in many kinds of poverty in our world, there is an urgent need to have conversation that will be fruitful and that will lead to common action to end poverty for good'

In 2015, a workshop on human rights and human dignity in Brazil brought together participants from very different churches and faith-based development organisations around the world, including participants from the UK (from Christian Aid), Germany, Brazil, Bolivia, Myanmar, Madagascar, Denmark, the United States, India, the Czech Republic and Mexico.⁸ All gathered there were filled with passion and resolve to address injustice in the world and to respond with compassion to the needs of the suffering. Our most important concern was to find a way of speaking, acting and engaging with the church and with the world that could be effective in bringing bread to the hungry, power to those denied it, and freedom to those captive to oppressive regimes and social norms.

At first the conversation was tentative, as it proved difficult to express the wide variety of experience and opinion represented by the participants. For many, the language of human rights is a precious and unquestionable language of freedom and promise, and a language that the churches could (and do) share with confidence. For others, particularly from the global South, the language of human rights sounds irreducibly Western and therefore makes a poor conversation partner with their non-Christian neighbours.

For some, talk of human rights seems simply vacuous because the fruits of its promise have not yet reached

Education about their rights has enabled young women in Brazil to lobby for extra funding from their city council for schools.



the very poorest among them. There is frustration with a language that can be high on aspiration, but low on fulfilment. For others, on the other hand, human rights has now become a language claimed and celebrated by even the most marginalised of the indigenous peoples and is one that they value and choose to speak. For others, it remains a very thin, secular language that might be better replaced. For some, it has strong echoes of a time when theologians of liberation made its words all but holy. For others it is a precious global language to which we should hold firmly. For some it is tainted by colonial implications.

This paper seeks to dwell with the awkwardness of a conversation like that one, to hear what faith might say to human rights and to listen to how some in the world might want to 'put God to rights'.

From Christian Aid's perspective, this is no abstract or theoretical conversation. If we are to work together with partners of all faiths and none in overcoming poverty, then we need to find ways to speak and frame not only our hopes, but also the tools we use to achieve them. We need to overcome the stumbling blocks that prevent us from making vivid and present God's good news for the poor. Face to face with people who are living in many kinds of poverty in our world, there is an urgent need to have conversation that will be fruitful and that will lead to common action to end poverty for good.

The story of human rights

A key date in the story of human rights is the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on 10 December 1948. Each year, 10 December is still marked as Human Rights Day to commemorate how, after a world war, many nations came together to declare what they believed were the things owed to all people – rights that we are mutually obliged, and even glad, to give to one another and expect from one another.

But of course, this day was one significant step in a much longer story. Philosophers from classical times had pondered what might be held to be universal principles and standards for human life. From the Ten Commandments in the Bible to Magna Carta in King John's England, from the English Bill of Rights to Rousseau's social contract, from Thomas Paine on the rights of man to Mary Wollstonecraft on the rights of women and the American Declaration of Independence, there is a long and rich story of people working to further the common good by establishing agreed principles about what is right and what is due to everyone. Even though it is possible, with hindsight, to see the limits and failings of each of these moments in the story and to see who was left out of what were claimed to be universal principles, we can trace a search for something good. Since 1948 the story has continued as people have argued for different kinds of rights (such as social and economic rights to go alongside civil and political rights) and for rights to be extended properly to include all people (those living with disability, children, lesbian, gay and transgender people, for example).

What is striking about the story of human rights is the real quest to find values and principles that leave no one out (even if attempts to do just that have often failed). H.G. Wells, for example, wrote about the rights of the 'world citizen' and the 1942 version of his text, published in the midst of the second world war, said simply and straightforwardly: 'These are the rights of all human beings'.⁹

The 1948 Universal Declaration itself, in Article 1, affirms the 'inherent value of human dignity' and declares that this value should be upheld 'without distinction of any

kind'. It is striking that the aim is to say something about all human beings without qualification, and to affirm 'human dignity'. The Declaration makes no attempt to say on what this dignity is founded or to justify the claims for universality, but its ringing affirmations and claims reflect a determination to enable the world's people to say something important about a shared understanding together. The language of dignity is right there in the key document of the human rights story. And the repetition of 'everyone' in the Declaration resounds with a moving confidence. Here are words for all of us, every single human being.

It is not easy now to imagine how poignantly significant it must have been then to make such a declaration, to seek to act in ways that might prevent the kind of suffering that the war had brought, and to imagine together what it could mean to treat *all* human beings with dignity and respect. From a world that had been divided into allies and enemies came the promise of a world in which people could be united around a sense of common values in mutual obligation.

The narrative of rights is also significant in describing all people as those who bear the kind of dignity that should not need to beg or plead for respect, freedom and life, but to whom such things are owed or due. Rights language can be seen as empowering and dignifying, in that it turns attention not to the charity of those who might grant gifts or bounty, but to the claims for justice of any human being in need. Any human person thus becomes neither the subject of pity nor the supplicant for mercy, but the dignified bearer of inalienable rights.

Those involved in the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights came from many backgrounds, but they included those such as Charles Malik, Lebanese philosopher, diplomat and Christian theologian, who were people of faith. Many would argue that the faith traditions fed like tributaries into the river of the human rights language, though the language itself was resolutely secular – it had to be so to achieve a universality that everyone in the world, of all faiths and none, could recognise and own.

Today, the benefits of the language of human rights may be appreciated across the theological spectrum. Theologian Linda Hogan, in her book *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, says that:

'Human rights represents one of the great civilising projects of modernity'.¹⁰

Not everyone agrees wholeheartedly with this commendation, as we shall see, but few would dispute that the language of human rights has become a primary

discourse of global politics, and also a prominent language among many people of faith who are engaging in social movements for change. Seen from its embedded history, it resounds with deeply felt aspirations to change a world of injustice, pain and war into one in which *every* human being may share in a full and free life. It also acts to shift our way of responding to poverty and inequality – away from dependence on the pity or virtues of the powerful, and towards the empowerment of those in poverty, changing the ways in which we all conceive of our obligations to one another.

Paris is a member of St John's Church in Mufulira, Zambia. He stands in an ecumenical coalition of churches committed to campaigning for the rights of his community, and advocating for fairer tax rules and increased transparency in the extractives industry. His hope is that local people will benefit from their own resources and not be robbed of the profits.



Christian theology and human dignity

There is much within the Christian tradition that affirms the value of human life, and significantly of each and every human life. Within the traditions of the Bible, we find stories, traditions and sayings that deliberately, and often counter-culturally for their time, affirm the worth of every person. And it is these passages, passages that so often stand out within their setting, that point us to a horizon in which *all* human beings are held to have inherent worth. The text most often quoted as people seek to draw theological parallels with human rights thinking or simply to point to what the Bible says about the dignity of human beings is Genesis 1:27:

'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.'

This verse affirms that all human beings (not only the king, or free men, or property owning men) are made in the image of God, a radical idea for the world out of which it came. It affirms that it is because of our relationship with God that we are all blessed by God and have value, being 'very good' (1:31). Our dignity comes from our being somehow like God, being sacred. The Christian writer Simone Weil wrote in 1943 that there is a longing in every human heart for an absolute good, rooted in a world beyond this one (a sacred world), and that each person may hold 'every human being without any exception as something sacred to which he (sic) is bound to show respect.'¹¹

Jesus himself consistently challenged any implication that some human beings are of more worth than others. In a time when children were little regarded, when infanticide was common in some communities, he placed a child in the midst of the crowd and said:

'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' (Mark 9:37)

With this saying Jesus powerfully revived and deepened the sense that *all* are made in the image of God (if we welcome a human being, we are somehow welcoming God), and that this applies not only to adults but to children too. In the world that Jesus proclaims, the first into the Kingdom of God are the least regarded in the world, a move that challenges all notions of privilege, status or exclusion. And he repeatedly surprised the religious leaders of his day by treating all people as 'clean', all as potential disciples or redeemed sinners, all as bearing the dignity of the image of God.

Here is what some would claim to be the significance of the specifically Christian witness to the worth of human beings and the respect and treatment they are due. It begins with our being created by God and bearing God's image, all of us. It is not about a list of claims, which we might make for ourselves, but about a common dignity that we share with others, a dignity that resides not in our usefulness to society, our skills, status or wisdom, but simply in our being human, sacred to our creator. In the Christian tradition such dignity is not in any sense a matter of aspiration of hope for the future or of political and social ambition, but something more like a revelation of a truth that cannot be erased. Theologian Sarah Bachelard, for example, writes that, 'the unconditional preciousness and mattering of every human being is not merely an ideal, but a deep truth.'¹²

Within the Christian tradition, we are bidden to 'love one another', but not in a sentimental way. The call to love is a demand not just to 'do right by' others, but to act towards them with a love inspired by wonder. The Christian faith inspires people to love sacrificially, to let go even of what they might be 'due' in the service of others (on the model of Jesus himself who did not 'grasp at equality with God'¹³). In the Christian tradition it is often in foregoing what might be described as our 'rights' for the sake of others that we become most fully human. Rowan Williams writes, for example, that, 'we are most human when least obsessed with defending and promoting our self-interest and when recognising our shared human needs.'¹⁴

Thus Christian thinking holds together the sacred dignity of each and every human person with the obligation and the call to 'let go' of self out of love for the other. Christian thought is infused with the language of love and calls us to behave towards one another in response to what the other person might call forth from us. Love is what enables and inspires us to recognise that other people should be treated well. The Christian writer Richard Rorty argues that it is when we cease to think of another human being as *human* that we might be tempted to violate their rights. It is not reason itself that will convince us of the value of other human beings, but something more like love,¹⁵ and it is this kind of love that faith (though perhaps not faith alone) can nurture and grow.

Throughout Christian history there have been significant traditions of thought about what claims we make of each other and what duties we owe to each other. The idea that there are some freedoms that we all should have can be seen in Christian thinking in the Middle Ages and there is discussion of what 'rights' might be considered 'natural'

in the work of Thomas Aquinas. There is a continuity here with the language of rights and it would be perverse to disconnect these worlds entirely. We can see echoes and parallels with human rights thinking in the key founders of the Reformation as they struggled to worship in freedom and peace according to their conscience, and also in the traditions of Catholic Social Teaching with its clear and constant focus on the dignity of the human person.

What distinguishes Christian reflections on human persons is a sense of rootedness in the relationship with God, in the command to love neighbour (and even enemy) and in the willingness to surrender what might be owed to me for the sake of the other.

So what's the problem?

In some contexts human rights advocates and people of faith readily make common cause, recognise echoes of their different vocabularies in each other's ways of speaking and work side by side to make a better world. But at other times, these worlds collide and a bridge is needed to make conversation possible. From universities to local communities, from think tanks and agencies to churches, there are places where human rights and faith challenge one another. Below are presented some of the particular challenges made and also some suggestions about how those challenges might be addressed.



Raquel and Daniel work for an ecumenical youth network linked to our partner in Brazil. They actively campaign from a faith perspective on issues facing young Brazilians such as violence, gender discrimination and homophobia. Daniel says: 'What moves our political work is spirituality'.

Challenging human rights language

There are those who challenge the language of human rights, often from a position of faith, arguing that it is unfounded, without philosophical underpinning. 'How do we know?' they ask, 'that these rights exist?' Such challengers do not actually want to deny food to the hungry, abolish democracy or promote torture, but they fear that if we ask too much of the language of human rights we shall find ourselves staring into an abyss, because these claims do not rest on anything solid. Is saying that rights are 'self-evident' just a way of saying that we have no evidence to support them? If they are simply what we want to be the case, then are they merely arbitrary and therefore vulnerable to change? (For example, when nation states are under threat they do sometimes abandon the commitment to the right not to be tortured, and they cease to find such rights 'self evident'.)

The Scottish philosopher and theologian Alasdair MacIntyre famously argued that human rights have no more status than fictional creatures. He wrote that, 'the truth is plain: there are no such rights... and belief in them is one with belief in witches and unicorns'.¹⁶ He wants there to be a better world, but he believes that there are better ways to change the world for good than to rely on illusory and fictional 'rights', which we cannot, ultimately, defend. The sense of how we ought to behave towards one another has to have a foundation underneath it or else it will simply collapse.

Rowan Williams argues that human rights need, and in fact do have, such a foundation in the sacredness of human beings, a foundation strong enough that it can protect us even from the dangers of any overweening nation state. And theologian John Milbank argues that what we see in the discourse of human rights is that the liberal political order has shed its original theological framework, a framework that needs to be restored if we are to find a secure place from which to uphold what is good for human beings.

There are also those who argue that human rights do have a philosophical foundation, but that it lies inexorably

in a way of understanding the world that belongs to a particular context associated with Western culture and now often discredited or disregarded. There is a view that the language of human rights is too rooted in the philosophical underpinning of the European Enlightenment and in an understanding of the human being as a detached, autonomous and free individual, a tradition associated with European (or Northern) secularism. This idea of the 'self' has since been deconstructed in Western philosophy and is not recognised in cultures and contexts around the world where human community, rather than individuality, is highly valued as the place where human life finds its meaning. The Cartesian view of the disembodied, thinking individual is not one that most human beings now share, and, so it is argued, the language of human rights seems to depend on a model of human identity now outmoded and inappropriate.

The way we speak of human rights also seems, arguably, to rely on an essentialist understanding of human nature as though to be human is always and everywhere the same, rather than being lived and formed within particular cultures and stories. The universal human being of the human rights discourse is really just a particular model of Western, male humanity, and it fails to take account of the diversity of human experience across the world. It disguises the embeddedness and particularity of human life, replacing it with a Western, secular and liberal 'norm', which hides different understandings of humankind according to its own interests. Thus, Linda Hogan writes:

'Human rights discourse can no longer ignore the ethical responsibilities associated with rendering visible the experiences of those who are both unseen and excluded.'¹⁷

There are certainly voices from the global South who see this origin in Enlightenment philosophical thinking as an expression of the culture of the colonial powers. Human rights, as some see them, come from the story of those who have colonised and dominated other communities

and cultures for centuries, and particularly from the very people and systems who have actually failed to end poverty or promote social justice globally. They come from the nations that have produced the kind of economics that enables individuals to succeed at the expense of the wider community and that creates the very inequalities that human rights language pretends to address. Some protest that there is the deepest irony in thinking that human rights language has brought hope to the world. From their point of view it is simply at one with the cultural world that made colonialism possible.

The Sri-Lankan Christian writer Vinoth Ramachandra, in his book *Subverting Global Myths*, argues that the origins of human rights lie in a philosophical tradition which, though it spoke of self-evident rights for all, actually only applied them to white, male human beings of sound mind. He writes:

‘Western libertarian movements have bequeathed to secular modernity a bizarre notion of the human individual: an independent, solitary will, lodged in an unsatisfactory body not of its choosing.’¹⁸

Boaventura de Sousa Santos, one of the driving forces behind the establishment of the World Social Forum, in a book of striking passion entitled *If God were a Human Rights Activist*, rails against a human rights tradition that he believes is fatally implicated in the colonial project. In his view, the world is still dominated by the idea of individual autonomy, while the conditions of this autonomy are still distributed unequally. We need a theology and a politics that is communitarian rather than individualistic and we need to bring a hermeneutic of suspicion to human rights language, which seems, he suggests, truly revolutionary only to those who live among the privileged. He writes of human rights that, ‘they provide weak answers to the strong questions confronting us in our time’.¹⁹

He denounces what he sees as the hypocrisy of conventional human rights thinking and argues that we need a new, much more subversive understanding of human rights that will actually deliver justice for those in poverty rather than collude in their oppression.

Another kind of protest against human rights from people of faith, is that it is a language that somehow has the wrong tone. The language of rights can only speak about a *minimal* approach to doing good, and about the least we might expect from one another and from the state. By contrast, it is argued, the language of faith is built on ideas like grace, generosity and love. Faith emphasises the love of God, which is more than justice in the sense of ‘what is due’, what each person ‘ought’ to have, but instead about what we might want to give to one another out of generosity, as God gives to each of us. If the language of rights is about claiming the basics, the language of faith celebrates the overflowing and overwhelming grace of love.

Rowan Williams notes the difference between a language that speaks of individual claims, and a (faith) language that asks what is involved when we recognise one another as human beings to whom we are bound in reciprocity.²⁰ This is a reaction to the apparent individualism of human rights and an expression of a faith that understands being human as about relatedness to the other. Sarah Bachelard, like Richard Rorty, writes about the significance of the language of love and Christian faith, arguing that it is only love (rather than law, for example) that can truly make visible the full humanity of another person. She writes that, ‘the language of rights disconnected from the language and experience of love cannot reveal the full reality of another human being’.²¹

This highlights one way in which human rights language simply doesn’t sound right to some people of faith. It sounds too legalistic, somehow shrill and even arrogant in its statements about entitlement, and seems to lack the human warmth and the expansiveness of talk of love,

generosity and grace. Simone Weil captures something of this reservation:

‘...what should have been a cry of protest from the depth of the heart has been turned into a shrill nagging of claims and counter claims, which is both impure and unpractical.’²²

Christian Aid’s experience is that people of faith tend to challenge the human rights discourse not for a lack of philosophical foundations, or for universalising a Western anthropology, but simply for speaking in language that does not resonate with the language of faith and its talk of love, generosity and compassion. It is here that Christian Aid partners around the world often find themselves building bridges and helping two communities to understand each other better. Human rights defenders are, of course, far from without love for humankind. They do want to make claims for every human being, but they also know about generosity and grace, and have a rich imagination for a better world.



Our supporters marched from Abingdon to Oxford in solidarity with the March for Justice in India. They were part of a movement that won a new land reform policy guaranteeing equal access to land and livelihood resources for all in India.

How shall we hear these challenges?

For those deeply committed to human rights language and human rights work, some of the questions raised by people of faith may seem astonishing and even dangerous.

Many of the questions raised about philosophical foundations and the traditions of the Enlightenment have already been explored by those who use the language of human rights, and it really is no longer the case (if it ever truly was) that the discourse of human rights only finds a home within a Western and liberal setting. Non-Western voices have for decades shaped the discussion and helped it evolve. It is true that not all countries were represented at the time of the Declaration of 1948, but many emerging countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East were enthusiastic about the Declaration and the work that followed it and used it as a resource in their own struggles for independence (from the Western powers). It is also the case that non-Western and newly independent nations were crucial in the framing of second and third generation rights.

Linda Hogan argues that a pattern has emerged in the development of human rights: first, a step forward and a new human rights proposal emerges from a particular context, and then something like a universal claim is articulated, which in turn is adopted by other communities who develop them further in unanticipated ways. So the development of human rights in practice and law does not now look like the dominance of Western liberal imperialism.

Hogan also argues that there is now a general acceptance that we cannot speak of 'universal human nature' (for all the reasons that feminism, for example, has highlighted), but this does not mean that we must simply fall into a potentially dangerous relativism. Instead we find a community of human beings, seeking to communicate across our different traditions and to arrive at an account of our shared values. It is possible to find things in common, but now from the understanding that all of us are embedded, contextualised people who belong to places and traditions and have particular and different experiences. There is no longer a sense of an abstracted, universalised humanity, but this has not negated the

need for us to have a global conversation about what we owe, in mutuality, to each other and to all. Unlearning our conviction that we can somehow readily speak for 'Everyman' doesn't mean that we can say nothing to each other, but that we are finding different ways to engage in a complex conversation.

The criticism of the individualism at the heart of human rights language is sometimes, tellingly, challenged by those who say that no *victims* of suffering and exploitation ever make this critique,²³ and that the imperative to protect each and every human being is different from a commitment to an individualistic notion of what it means to be human.

There are indeed challenges to human rights language and practice because of the ways in which they have failed and can fail, seen in those moments when nations readily employ the language of rights in regard to other countries, but remain hesitant on home ground. The earnest language of rights seems then to become no more than a rhetorical political tool. This is a serious matter, but it need not undermine the human rights language itself so much as undermine the nations who do not live up to it.

However we respond to them, the critiques of human rights leave us with warnings to heed. There is always the possibility that nations will cloak their own vested interests in lofty language. There is always the danger that we limit human aspiration by setting minimal goals. There is always the risk that in seeking to speak into a global space we use language that is emptied of meaning by losing its roots in lived traditions, whether of faith or values. But none of this should allow us to forget the value of a truly global conversation about our common obligations to each other. Though we cannot always explicitly agree where human worth comes from or in what it is grounded, we might remember that even faith language struggles to articulate this and often simply evokes a sense of something so true that it can be called sacred. And we must not forget that appeals to human rights have often been powerful in enabling those in poverty, those excluded or marginalised, not to wait for the pity of others but to seek what ought to belong to them with a proper dignity and power.

Challenging the language of faith

Just as human rights defenders need to listen to those who want to critique human rights or who just can't appreciate its language, so people of faith need to hear how they are perceived and to discover what they may have missed. Faith should motivate us to get beneath the tension that can haunt conversations about human rights, for the sake of all that is really at stake.

Some argue that the language of faith is simply too fragile, too dependent on the kindness or virtue of particular people, to bring real and lasting change to the world. The language of human rights is much better, they say, at bringing liberation and hope to the poor, because it works to protect the well-being of all with the weight and force of global agreement and law. The poor cannot wait for virtues of love and generosity to be nurtured in the hearts of the faithful. This is simply too sentimental, too focused on the potential virtues of the powerful rather than the needs of the impoverished, and too little rooted in real paths to lasting political change. All people need and deserve their rights, those things that are owed to them and which the law should protect. They need justice not charity; if all are entitled to live a good human life, the language of rights much more than faith insists that people should be able to access the political power to find that life.

The critics of the faith communities also say that rights-based approaches are much more successful at empowering those in poverty, whereas faith-led approaches tend to salve wounds but not challenge structures, remaining tied to outmoded (and patronising) donor-recipient models of solving problems. They argue that international covenants and conventions, along with legal instruments, will transfer power to those now in poverty and change the structures of the world such that no one needs to rely on the 'goodness' of others.

The failure of so many, among even the faithful, to honour basic human rights reveals that human rights aspiration and practice is a far stronger way to bring a better world

than to wait for often cautious, sometimes conservative and even uncaring religious leaders. Some people of faith may indeed say that human rights language is too individualistic or that human rights are as fictional as unicorns with no real philosophical foundations, but the victims of poverty, powerlessness and injustice do not bring these abstract critiques. Often voices from the global South argue strongly that it is the language of rights in which they see most hope for change. The Indian political scientist Neera Chandboke writes:

*'...no matter how beneficial or charitable a world that does not speak this language of rights may be, a world in which people do not relate to each other via rights will be sadly deficient in moral terms.'*²⁴

Human rights defenders often testify that local religious leaders, far from speaking up for the poor, are identified with an unjust status quo and with the defence of social norms or political regimes that keep people powerless and in poverty. In relation to the poverty and exclusion of women, for example, some faith leaders protest about the language of human rights, but this seems to their critics simply a way of evading the demands of justice in relation to women. Such faith leaders might protest that the language of rights is too much about entitlements and taking, but their critics see only their resistance to standing up to power or their keeping alive of unjust social norms.

Even more concerning are cases in which religious communities and their leaders are implicated in the *violation* of human rights. In the light of these, the intellectual arguments from faith leaders against human rights are seen as no more than the defensive protection of corrupt vested interests.

How shall we hear these challenges?

Those who, from faith, critique the human rights language, framework and discourse, need to listen to those who only hear, with a hermeneutic of suspicion, their reluctance to defend human rights. Some faith leaders need to repent of the temptation to seek affirmation from the powerful and the oppressive. Some may need to reflect on a tendency to oversimplify the human rights discourse and to see where it has been shaped by diverse and complex cultures and communities. They may need to become better at explaining what they mean by 'love' and to relate their own language to the language of justice.

'Love', for many outside of the context of faith, has come to be associated with nothing stronger than sentiment or emotion, whereas in Christian tradition love is a command to be obeyed. In Jesus' own summary of the commandments, we are instructed to love God and to love our neighbour with a directness that cannot depend on mere sentiment. This is what Christians mean when they say that there is something important about the language of love. They do believe that a world governed only by a kind of 'mechanical' attention to legal frameworks would be a bleak world indeed, but also that the profoundest love may find expression in rigorous laws and agreements too. For faith, law and love (or love and justice) belong resolutely together and neither can be real without the other.

As theologian Stephen Plant has pointed out in a lecture entitled *Love in a Time of Rights*:

'Understood properly, love is not merely an expression of benevolence, but is also an enactment of justice. Love not only gives to the other, it enacts the other's intrinsic worth.'²⁵

For people of faith it may also be important to hear, more positively, how effective and inspiring the language of human rights can be: for empowering those in poverty, for setting down clear and high hopes and for encouraging

people to reach beyond present experience. Faith does not have a monopoly on inspiration, bravery and hope, and sometimes human rights advocates can complement the faith community with their bold clarity in demanding a transformation of the present reality.

These are indications of some themes of the conversation that needs to happen on the bridge spanning the language of human rights and the language of faith. People of faith need to convince human rights advocates that the love they endorse is more than weak sentiment, but also need to recognise that those who speak of 'rights' are also often themselves inspired, like people of faith, by the deepest kind of love and hope.



Jack Grundy accompanies human rights defenders in Colombia, like members of our partner the Inter-Church Commission for Justice and Peace (CIJP), who face daily threats for their work with communities affected by conflict.

What really matters about this conversation?

'It is more vital than it has ever been that we find a language in which we can speak as a global community , or at least some ways of being fruitfully multilingual together'

It is striking that participants in this conversation often stereotype each other. To read some commentators you might think that all human rights advocates are resolutely secular, more interested in legal detail than in aspiration, and lacking in warmth and compassion. To read others you might think that all faith leaders are irredeemably conservative, naïve and simplistic, and more interested in 'doing good' in the world than in changing the world from its roots. And of course there is much overlap between the people in these communities and much diversity within them too. Conversations that become binary and polar often obscure things that everyone, on all 'sides', could learn. In standing against someone it is always easy to miss the vital corrective they bring, or the value of a voice different from your own.

It is more vital than it has ever been that we find a language in which we can speak as a global community, or at least some ways of being fruitfully multilingual together. As so many forces seem bent on separating us from one another in rival communities, there is a strong imperative

In 2012, marchers in India campaigned for a new land reform policy to guarantee access to land and livelihood resources for all, regardless of wealth or caste. Eight days in, the Indian government agreed to the marchers' demands.



to find ways of thinking of our common plight and our common obligations to each other in language that we can all share. The quest for universal foundations may need to be abandoned, but that does not mean that we need to abandon all attempts to speak together and to hold each other to account, as we recognise our irreducible particularity as human beings who live and make sense of our world in varied contexts and circumstances.

In an age of difference we need a consensus, a 'common language of humanity'²⁶ with global resonance and reach. We may indeed be living through times when human rights theory is insecure, but developing a unified practice of human rights has rarely seemed so very important. The language of human rights is not accepted everywhere as this common language, and it is often people of faith who challenge it. The question that therefore presents itself to each of us from all perspectives, is: are there ways in which such language could be framed and used so that it can be shared more fully? What would it take to heal some of the tensions and come to a more fruitful understanding?

How might human rights and faith relate to one another?

The language of human rights and the language of faith do have some roots in common. Even if they now find themselves in tension or at odds, their stories are intertwined. Christians, for example, have certainly been involved in the development of the human rights tradition, before, during and since the writing of the Declaration itself. There are those who will say starkly that, for example, 'the concept of human rights comes from the Bible'.²⁷ There are others who will take a pride in demonstrating how talk of human rights echoes the themes and central messages of the Bible. The churches in Brazil, for example, have published documents for local churches celebrating the articles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and placing them alongside both verses from the Bible and key ecumenical statements.²⁸ Each of the articles finds a resonance in at least one key biblical verse and church groups are encouraged to read the articles of the Declaration and to see how they cohere with their own hopes or to notice where they are violated. Even such things as the right to work and the right to holidays, the right to education and the right to enjoy the arts, are identified as paralleled in the Bible. These churches are therefore witnessing to a belief that the Declaration of Human Rights was and is nothing short of a contemporary expression of the gospel revealed in Scripture.

Others are more inclined to emphasise that faith can be a source of *inspiration* for welcoming human rights and working towards them. Faith is the source of the values that find legal expression in human rights language, or the source of the abstract thinking that finds practical expression in human rights advocacy. Such voices seem to say that the language of human rights and the language of faith are not the same, but they are significantly and readily related to one another. The world and the church needs both. We shouldn't confuse them, but make sure that they work appropriately in tandem. They don't represent opposing views of the world (secular and sacred), but rather have different functions – the one being properly understood as the expression of the values held within faith. We shouldn't let the 'secular world' take over human rights, but rather re-find the ways in which the language of human rights does have resonance with the language of faith.

Rowan Williams, with typical subtlety, writes of 'the theological insights that have moved us irreversibly in the direction that leads towards universal doctrines of rights.'²⁹ He argues that it is theological ideas that can provide, and historically did provide, the foundations upon which human rights claims stand and without which they are mere assertion.

There are still others who say that we don't need to tie up all the theoretical problems or trace every historical thread, but we do need to discover any possible way to act together to do what is right in the world. Even if we cannot entirely answer the challenges about the history of human rights, it is surely more important that we listen to the experiences of those in poverty, those on the margins in today's world, and hear their cries. We might not be able straightforwardly to *argue* our way to a better future, and we might resent and regret this, but we must, nevertheless, find something strong around which to gather. People of faith and human rights advocates can find, and need to find, common cause for the sake of those in poverty. The promise of the discourse of human rights was that it could provide a shared language that might actually deliver some practical and real outcomes, and it is those outcomes that really matter.

Gerrie ter Haar, well known for her work on religion and development, argues that there is this pressing pragmatic need to find a way of enabling the voices of faith and of human rights to speak to one another, and she believes that this can only really happen when we listen to others on their own terms. She urges that 'rather than lamenting or ignoring religious realities, human rights actors should consider how they can influence religious ideas in such a way as to further the human rights agenda'.³⁰

But crucially, she also argues that people of faith could bring helpful ideas to the conversation, such as their sense of how codes of law and behaviour may have roots in something beyond themselves and carry a universal authority. She favours finding 'common cause' and learning from each other rather than trying to establish the genesis of one tradition in the other or the superiority of one discourse over the other. She has the more modest aim, of making it possible for people to become fruitfully

'bilingual' in faith and human rights. This aim will be best achieved when there is a better mutual listening, when we let go of the urge to 'win' the debate about which came first, or which is best founded or which more radical.

Richard Amesbury and George Newlands, in developing their theology of human rights, similarly argue for an approach that would celebrate, rather than bemoan, our being situated as human beings in specific traditions, each with our own particular language and story. They suggest that 'we should not replace richly textured moral traditions that human beings inhabit with a single decontextualized "global ethic"'.³¹

The suggestion that all our particular and beloved narratives of faith or philosophy lead to the same universal and abstract centre is unlikely to aid progress in working together, because by that logic, each narrative is in the end expendable. We love and cherish the stories and convictions that shape us and, for all of us, they are more than vessels of something else. The language of faith does not simply sustain or underpin something else more important, but is itself the most significant tongue for those who live by it. So any conversation about shared values cannot dispense with the specific language of faith as merely instrumental towards a greater cause. As the theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas argues, few of us are inspired by abstract theories, but rather by the particular stories of our treasured traditions of faith (for example, the stories of the Bible).³²

Linda Hogan, in *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, argues that we will do better at holding together human rights advocates, people of faith and their various and diverse critics (and enable them to hear one another) if we stop competing for the universalist centre and, instead, accept that we all inhabit 'tradition-thick' specific discourses and languages. We could let go of our fear of having no absolutes, recognise that we are all creatures of tradition and history, and instead find ways of hearing one another. We need to find solidarity, if not around the illusions of abstraction then in our common sense that human life,

and the life of all creation, is precious (sacred/of inherent worth/inalienably valuable) and needs protection and hope. She writes:

'A viable human rights ethic can only proceed on the basis that shared values will emerge through a dialogical engagement between multiple, situated, historical communities, including religious communities, that are open to internally and externally generated social criticism.'³³

Put simply, we need to talk to one another, trusting that we shall discover what, as we each understand it within our different traditions, is significant to us all. We need to let go of the old binaries: universalist secularism/particular faith, progressive liberalism/static culture, even human rights/human dignity. We need to let go of the ambition to resolve the 'awkward conversation' between human rights advocates and people of faith as though one knock-down argument will do it.

The way forward is to make places for conversation between these two sets of languages, so that they can listen to one another from within their particularity and so that each can hear the other address what they have forgotten or left out.

Faith communities need to listen carefully to what the human rights language offers as critique to their own languages. We need to hear that, often when the world is seen from the point of view of its suffering, the language of rights makes a particular sense and answers a particular cry. We need to hear that both our language of faith and our language of rights are shaped by particular contexts, and that both are continually re-shaped. In the same way, we should not simply replace our language of faith with the assumed good of human rights talk. This language too comes from a context and struggles to articulate certain things. We need to be able to speak to it about the grace

of God in us, of a love and compassion that can respond to human suffering in ways that go further than the giving of entitlement and the framing of laws. There is a place

for 'love in a world of rights', a place for human faces in a world of declarations and agreements, and a place for particular stories in a world of abstraction.



Aline Nahimana, who lives with HIV, participates in a programme on Radio Ivyizigiro (Hope). This is one of many projects in Burundi that we support, which brings together religious partners working on HIV to conduct advocacy and lobbying for the rights of HIV positive and affected people.

How could Christian Aid's experience contribute to this conversation?

At Christian Aid, in our work to overcome poverty, we draw on both the language of rights and the language of faith. On Human Rights Day (10 December) in 2015, Christian Aid published a blog entitled 'Human rights: to combat poverty, injustice and inequality', and affirmed that 'international human rights law is a fundamental framework for civil society organisations'.

We have found that the fulfilment of human rights – economic, social, civil and political – is vital for human flourishing and for tackling poverty. In a world of unequal power relations, a rights-based approach can indeed empower communities, so that they can find a way to access the essential services required for a dignified life, such as healthcare, education, and clean water. We have found that a human rights framework has proved an essential tool in creating a more inclusive world – it helps us to address violence and discrimination, including against women and girls, and ensures that identity (for instance gender, ethnicity, caste, religion, class, sexual orientation) is no longer a barrier to equal treatment. We believe that the robust, inspiring and empowering framework of human rights is a vital and effective part of our work.

We partner with many organisations who are working on human rights. One example is the Institute of Socio-Economic Studies (INESC) in Brazil, which works to empower people with the knowledge they need for public lobbying. Students Racquel (20) and Raissa (18) used the training they received at INESC to lobby their city council for more money so that the schools could be properly maintained, so that the right to education could be upheld. Our partner Asuda in Iraq works towards the eradication of physical and psychological violence against women, empowering them to claim their rights to be protected from violence and to give them access to legal, counselling and medical services. In India we work through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, empowering Dalit human rights advocates and civil society organisations to address caste-based discrimination. In these and many other places, we have found the framework of human rights to be unfailingly helpful in protecting and empowering the most vulnerable,

in seeking radical and lasting change and in inspiring a vision for a better world.

We have testimony from our experience, and that of our partners in the global South, affirming the role that human rights can play in bringing change and overcoming poverty. In some contexts, it is the most powerful and robust language we have to stand with and to empower those in poverty. Sometimes, it is the frame through which we have found ourselves challenged to think again about the world, its powers and those who have power taken from them. We know that we have moved, over time, from seeing our work as rooted in the 'charity' of the donor to starting from the needs of those in poverty for 'justice'. Sometimes, it is the language of rights that has helped us to be part of a church not tied to an unequal status quo, and which is more than gently reforming, but truly prophetic. It is this language that sometimes reminds us of the Christ who came proclaiming 'good news to the poor', 'release to the captives' and a time 'of the Lord's favour' (see Luke 4:18-19). This language has clarity, an intention to give attention and priority to every human being in whatever circumstances and a hope for a truly global human community. This beckons us to be bold. And it is this language that helps us to make common cause with others of all faiths and none in many different places and communities.

But the language of faith also fundamentally shapes us, and many of our supporters and partners. We are glad to be, in this sense, 'bilingual'. It is the language of faith that inspires us with wonder at the dignity of human beings, and without which, the language of rights could seem mechanical and minimal. The stories from the Bible about the sacred dignity of human beings, the witness of Jesus who so often placed those regarded as marginal at the centre and promised them blessing, the long tradition of Christians reflecting on what it is that we owe to each other in the mutual recognition of human beings made in God's image and formed in community – all of these shape our thinking and our acting most profoundly. We recognise that each of these languages, at their best, reveal to us things that the other does not. Our conversation, insight and work is better for listening to

both and for allowing each to critique, challenge and enrich the other.

We share the frustrations of those human rights defenders who see faith leaders as conservative and oppressive, and we know that this is sometimes a true reflection. But we believe that when faith is at its most 'faithful', it is ready above all to seek justice for all and to leave no one behind. We are glad to work with faith leaders for gender justice, for example, not simply because we believe in human rights, but because we believe that the Christian faith proclaims that all human beings are made 'in the image of God', male and female. We sometimes share the sense that human rights language can sound technical and insistent, but we also know that human rights defenders, as much as people of faith, can be motivated by love and compassion. We sense how repeated calls for 'justice' can sometimes sound dry and that justice without love can be a bleak vision, but we also hear in the word 'justice' the biblical call to become aligned with the purposes of God, the God who is love.

We know that we can only work with and from the resources and traditions that we know and share, and which have shaped us and our work over 70 years, but we also want to work with others in the world who share with us a common cause, and we are content to hear echoes of our own passions and commitments in their particular heritage and language. We know that our origins are within one of the colonial powers, and that our ways of thinking about and knowing the world are bound to be shaped by that. And for that reason we are keen to listen to and amplify the voices of those who can help us (re)shape the language of rights and of what is right, for the good of all. We know that the discourse of human rights has functioned both to speak for the powerless and as a discourse of the powerful, but we are determined to help shape it and implement it in partnership with those to whom power needs to be given.

We have sometimes found ourselves providing a kind of bridge between human rights defenders, steeped in that language, and faith leaders who find that language alien and strange. We have noticed that sometimes the supposed competition between the language of faith and human rights has been used by those holding power to manipulate faith communities against human rights activists. We have discovered how important it can be to help each community to hear the other and to move from a fearful standoff to a fruitful conversation. Whether this is about opening up the biblical traditions that promote the equal worth of women and men or about enabling the language of human rights to be framed in a more familiar language of faith, we have some experience of working in this 'bilingual' space as interpreters and enablers. And in the formation of, for example, the global Sustainable Development Goals, we are encouraged to find that people of all faiths and none can and do work together to find a common language to express our hopes and goals for the world's future. Our aim is to utilise our place in this common ground to help build a more fruitful conversation.



Jewish, Christian and Islamic leaders gathered at St Paul's Cathedral in London before heads of state gathered at the United Nations to agree Sustainable Development Goals. The faith leaders urged the Prime Minister to 'leave no one behind!'

Conclusion

Conversations on this subject are often difficult, characterised by misunderstanding and sometimes wilful mishearing. There are those who fear to critique the language of human rights in case we are left naked in a cruel world and the most vulnerable left unprotected. There are those who oppose it with such vehemence that they cannot hear what good it might be speaking. Others are angry at some faith communities' failure to stand up for human dignity and for justice, and so fail to hear what faith might bring to the task of protecting and nurturing good human life. There needs to be a new conversation, so that we can hear one another again. In this conversation we need those, like Esther Reed, who will remind us that 'the witness of many faithful Christian people is that human rights can be a form of testimony to the righteousness of God'³⁴ and who encourages us to trust that we can listen to these different languages 'without either pretending that there is unbroken continuity between the two or perceiving their difference in terms of unbridgeable strangeness.'³⁵

It is hard to find language that can carry the weight of what we hope for, long for and work for in overcoming poverty. We need the robust language of international law and agreement, but we also need the poetry that will inspire a human heart to love. Sentimental appeals to charity will not be enough without a rigorous idea of justice and right to accompany them. But arithmetical notions of fairness and duty will not set alight a passion for the kind of justice of which the Bible speaks. For a Christian aid agency, what is right will be rooted not only in what is truly human, but always also in what God intends and brings. And it is this promise, this purpose, which inspires our words and deeds, whether we are speaking of human rights or human dignity.

Next steps

At Christian Aid, we hope that this paper might stimulate conversation and dialogue within our own communities and more widely, so that we can become more fruitfully bilingual, hearing and learning from each other, rather than living with a continuing and sometimes unarticulated tension. Where, in your context, might a conversation be most needed? And who might best facilitate and resource it? We hope that you and others will join in the conversation, and find ways to make it both possible and fruitful.

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