

BOOK REVIEW

of

Thomas K. Johnson,
Human Rights: A Christian Primer,
Verlag für Kultur und Wissenschaft, 2008.

January 2009

A free download of this book is available from the following URL:

<http://www.iirf.eu/index.php?id=95>

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Over the years it has likely always been assumed that Christianity had a good deal to say about philosophy, and certainly about religion. In recent years there has been an increasing number of those who challenge the scientific community in subjects such as evolution, not only because of the weak evidence for evolution but also because of the increasing realization that it is based primarily on materialistic philosophy rather than empirical evidence. Some of those challenging the scientific community in this area are part of the so-called intelligent design movement, and many, but not all, of those are Christians that are likely motivated at least in part by their Christian beliefs. This is part of a larger scale movement among Christians to more effectively engage the larger culture in which we find ourselves. Evangelical Christianity, beginning about one hundred years ago, began to withdraw from academic and intellectual spheres of the culture and focused increasingly upon individual, spiritual experience. The focus was upon conversion, personal moral improvement, the experience of Christ in one's life, and a happier, more fulfilled existence. Of course there were always those who also stressed the intellectual aspects of Christianity, but one person in particular who called on the Christian community to more effectively engage society was Carl F. H. Henry. Some consider his publication of *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* in 1947 to be a watershed event that criticized the societal disengagement of fundamentalists. Stanley J. Grenz writes: "In a sense, Carl F. H. Henry launched the contemporary evangelical intellectual enterprise. His *Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* came as a clarion call to theological conservatives to leave their self-imposed isolation and bring biblical convictions into the arena of modern culture." Between 1976 and 1983 Henry published his monumental six-volume *God, Revelation and Authority*. More recent calls for cultural engagement include the very well-received *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* by Nancy Pearcey, published in 2004. Pearcey argues that true Christianity must engage all aspects of life and not just personal piety. Another recent call for cultural engagement comes from Phillip Johnson, especially in his book *Reason in the Balance*, published in 1995. Two quotes from Phillip Johnson: "A person or a society that ignores the Creator is ignoring the most important part of reality, and to ignore reality is to be irrational." "It may be rational to argue about whether God is real or unreal, but it is clearly irrational to assume that a God who is real can safely be ignored." Another area in which Christianity is perhaps making a greater impact upon society is the subject of Thomas Johnson's book, human rights. International organizations may well be open to Christian influences in this area since any attempt at establishing human rights legislation or guidelines inevitably must question the foundations of such legislation or guidelines. It is another application area, if you will, of the teachings of the Bible, which clearly, if taken seriously, have much to say about all areas of life.

Thomas K. Johnson has a Master of Divinity degree from Covenant Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. in ethics and philosophical theology from the University of Iowa. He is an ordained minister of the Presbyterian Church in America. He has taught at a number of universities and since 2003 he is Professor of Apologetics and Ethics at Martin Bucer Seminary (MBS) which has several study centers in major German cities, as well as in Austria and Switzerland, and in both Ankara and Istanbul, Turkey. In 2004 he helped establish the MBS study center in Zlin, Czech Republic. Since 2007 he has served as MBS Vice President for Research and Personnel Development. He also currently serves as interim dean of the Baltic Reformed Theological Seminary and is also directing the Comenius Institute in Prague. He has lectured in eleven countries and has about 80 published articles, essays, and reviews in several languages. Since 1994 his work has been largely sponsored through the International Institute for Christian Studies located in Overland Park, Kansas.

The book has five chapters. The chapter titles are as follows: Chapter 1, *Why Talk about Human Rights?*, Chapter 2, *Human Rights and the Human Quest*, Chapter 3, *Rights, Religions, and Ideologies*, Chapter 4, *Human Dignity and Rights: My Christian Perspective*, and Chapter 5, *Protecting Human Rights in Practice*. Chapter 4 also has an appendix, which is a copy of The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In Chapter 1 Johnson outlines why human rights as a topic is of international interest. Basically, it is because of an abysmal track record that threatens civilization. "The inhumanity of man toward man is so vast it defies belief or description. To compare human brutality with animal violence is truly an insult to most animals, not only because humans are more highly organized in their brutality but also because human brutality rarely benefits anyone in any way. Yet humans typically use one of our distinctive abilities, language and words, as an organic part of our brutality; criminals against humanity frequently use special language and words to describe their mass victims as less than fully human, even attempting to convince their victims it is not wrong to murder them." "At its core, the human rights movement is a reaction of horror to crimes against humanity, and this is a proper reaction that Christian believers should share and encourage. But the proper concern for human rights demands answers to the big questions about human life and the world, along with a loving critique of unbelieving theories, joined with the contributions of the best ideas about human rights that have arisen in light of the biblical message."

In Chapter 2 Johnson has much to write of an apologetic value. Not of a contrived apologetic, as though human rights are simply being used as an evangelical tool, but an apologetic that arises from the very real need for answers in attempting to respond to the very

real international need for a common understanding about human rights. Upon what do we claim that there are “human rights”? Referring to Albert Camus who was an atheist most of his life, Johnson writes “Camus realized that if God does not exist, then it is very difficult to avoid becoming a nihilist, feeling like and believing that there is no truth, no meaning for life, and no distinction between right and wrong. . . . His awareness of human need, suffering, and our common human moral obligation pushed him to break out of the dilemma and conclude that there must be a God who created human beings with a special dignity and destiny and who somehow stands behind moral obligation.” Reflecting on these things, Johnson writes: “Let me again state my perspective: human atrocities and the responding human rights movements are best understood in the light of the description of life and the world which arises from the Christian Bible. . . . Why do we have an awareness of a standard for human behavior? What is it about us humans that gives us rights different from those of an insect? Why do we so frequently destroy each other? . . . almost all normal people draw back and think that some things are really wrong”. Reflecting even farther, Johnson writes “At this point in the discussion, we all become rather uneasy, for we can hardly avoid the question of where this moral law comes from. Should we conclude that our moral knowledge is based on a real moral law that exists outside our minds? Then consistency will strongly push us to conclude that God exists”. Some will recall that this is the argument made by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. “If we do not want to conclude that God really exists, then consistency will push us to say and think that there is no real difference between good and evil.” Historically, the problem of evil in the world has been potentially difficult for theologians to reconcile with a good and powerful God. However, Johnson has an interesting approach and writes that “many thoughtless people have claimed that the existence of real evil in the world somehow makes belief in God impossible or more difficult. But this is silly. Such people have never considered what would have to follow if God does not exist; they should spend a day or two reading Camus. If God does not exist, we would not be able to say ‘This is evil’ and really mean anything by what we said.” In a footnote, Johnson writes “It seems to me that there are usually two types of people who are seriously interested in the so-called ‘Problem of Evil’ as a reason to reject Christian belief. The first type of person has been so deeply hurt by human suffering that he or she is continually angry at God: for this person, the Problem of Evil is an expression of anger at God. . . . The second type of person uses the Problem of Evil as an intellectual game to avoid an honest confrontation with God”. And why all of this discussion about human evil in a book about human rights? Johnson explains: “people regularly and repeatedly destroy other people, often using the power of the state or other powerful institutions to accomplish the greatest evils. And as part of this insidious pattern, the classic criminals against humanity often use deceptive words to explain to their followers and friends why their actions are good or necessary. The entire human rights movement is a gigantic protest against human nature as it is.”

In Chapter 3 Johnson discusses the bases for establishing human rights. If progress is to be made in terms of international human rights, upon what should that progress be based? Ideas have consequences, and the question needs to be addressed as to which religions, philosophies, etc. are consistent with the goals of the human rights movement and which are not? Johnson writes that “Some religions, philosophies, and ideologies lead to the abuse of human rights when they are consistently implemented, whereas other religions, philosophies, and ideologies motivate people to protect human rights.” “Too many books and articles about human rights talk as if the problems are only political or legal, neglecting the role of religions, philosophies, and ideologies in relation to human rights.” Johnson rejects the idea, seemingly held by many, that human rights come from the state or the government. Rather, he writes that “People have rights because of a God-given dignity, which is part of the image of God in humans. International law and human rights treaties should serve to protect and honor these rights, not give those rights.” “Human rights abuses are often closely tied to a political ideology, a dysfunctional religion, or a set of philosophical convictions which are used to justify criminal behavior. The enforcement of international laws against human rights abuses must be accompanied by the critique of the ideas that lead to such human rights abuses and a bold proclamation that God created people with special dignity in his image.”

In Chapter 4 Johnson gives his personal Christian perspective on human rights. He suggests that a proper view of human rights begins at the personal level and that pride is the enemy of human rights. “Instead of recognizing the dignity God has given to us and to our neighbors, we usually substitute pride, the vain attempt to imagine that we are better than someone else. . . . Pride is possible only because of a partly forgotten dignity that has been turned upside-down and then inflated like a balloon. Pride is possible only because of how God has made us; neither my dog nor my computer is proud. Recognizing and understanding our God-given dignity is a step toward overcoming pride and promoting a more humane and God-honoring way of life, individually, in our churches, and in society. The recognition of human dignity is a key step toward recovering from silly personal pride.” Two Christian teachings that bear especially on human dignity is that we have been created in the image of God, and God Himself became incarnate in Jesus Christ. “This incredible human dignity was confirmed by the Incarnation: God became a human being, a Jewish man, in the person of Jesus Christ. . . . The Incarnation corresponds with the previous work of God, that of creating humans in his own image. And the account of the Incarnation provides a confirmation of human dignity and value which is distinctive to the Christian faith.”

In Chapter 5 Johnson briefly describes how the Christian community has been a major contributor to human rights throughout history. “In spite of all the violence and suffering in the world, our world would be far worse without the many contributions of Christians and the influence of biblical ideas.” The church began early on to care for the sick, the elderly, the poor, etc. This was done in response to Biblical teachings, in the Old Testament as well as in, and especially in, the New Testament. Over time, as has been well documented, these activities of the church became developed into institutions for education, hospitals, orphanages, etc. “Evangelical Christians have a heritage of not only practicing personal love and mercy but also establishing organizations and programs to provide mercy and promote public justice (human rights protection).”

There are several important contributions that this book makes. It reinforces the important idea that Christian teachings are not just for personal piety but have very important things to say about all areas of life, and that human rights is one very important example. It also has the potential of expanding a Christian’s thinking as to God’s activities beyond individual salvation and holiness and of His concerns for world-wide justice, things not foreign to Biblical teaching but perhaps not frequently stressed. Depending on how much you may or may not already know about human rights, this book has the potential for expanding your horizons.