



Reflecting on Human Rights in Global Health Contexts

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Though human right to health is not widely discussed in theological literature, general human rights from biblical perspectives are a well-researched and reflected issue, and there is no dearth of knowledge on the topic. A few, with some from the majority world, are worth mentioning.

Yogarajah and Shirmacher, in their very comprehensive four articles, review the Christian faith and practice, the biblical roots and basis for international human rights, and reflect on the various Christian arguments for religious freedom. These articles came out of a global consultation in 2015, in Albania, and covers the above topics in detail.¹

Owoeye, from Obafemi Awolowo University in Nigeria, looks at the operation of fundamental human rights in the Deeper Life Bible Church, of which he is part, and reflects on the Nigerian constitution, church practices, and the biblical understanding of human rights as derived from the inherent dignity of the human person.²

In a review on human rights issues of Dalits in India, the author Monica Jyotsna Melanchthon notes that Christian theory and practice have also been woven into the fabric of Dalit, Adivasi, and the Indian woman's faith, courage, and healing in the face of the violation of their rights. She raises the question whether the Christian faith and theology can become a more certain foundation and steadfast resource for justice and human rights for this community, and goes on to review the biblical basis for human rights based on an individual's integrity, worth, and dignity. "An individual is entitled to at least three kinds of personal freedom: freedom of conscience, freedom

from unjust exploitation or oppression, and freedom to live a properly human life."³

In his article, Robert Mccorquodale recognizes that international legal protection of human rights offers both obligations on governments to which individuals or groups can appeal, and international standards by which governments can be judged. He identifies that one consequence of these developments is that the language of human rights is now used in many contexts: from national and international conflicts to personal relationships. He explores the extent to which this use of human rights is consistent with Christian understandings, noting the biblical emphasis of responsibility toward the oppressed (rather than rights of the oppressed) and the responsibility of individuals rather than only governments' (as expressed in the international rights system). The prophets do not address the oppressed, encouraging them to claim their rights, but rather address the powerful, noting their social responsibility toward orphans, widows, the poor, and foreigners. Human rights is a concept that includes responsibilities to others and to the community.⁴

All humans created equal and in *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27) is the underlying foundation of the Christian stand on human rights. The uniqueness of humanity, as carriers of *imago Dei*, though a marred masterpiece that needs to be restored back into its original form, is what drives our compassionate responses. Advocating for systems and structures that treat all of humanity as equal has been the foundation of many human rights and rights-based movements. Prophets of Old Testament times reprimanded and highlighted the



injustice of leaders and the systems they had set up, especially regarding their failure to treat the widow, the orphans, the poor, and aliens as equal to others. The Bible has much to say on this and about caring for people in the margins of society at that time. (Exodus 22:21-12; Leviticus 19:34, 25:35; Deuteronomy 10:18, 14:28-29, 15:7-11, 24:17-18; Isaiah 1:17; Jeremiah 7:6-7, 49:11) Jesus role-modeled by reaching out to those who were at the receiving end of such unjust systems and openly reprimanded the leadership who had set up systems that discriminated against the poor. (Matthew 23:14)

At the same time, Pauline writings clearly show that rights and freedom must be seen considering the overall Kingdom lifestyle and Kingdom character. (Galatians 5:1, 13-15) Freedom and rights must exist in order to live to the full potential of God's purpose for one's life. The hope of the "new heaven and new earth," where there will be the no infant mortality or premature deaths and an enhanced life expectancy (Isaiah 65:17), and where there will be justice and righteousness flowing like a river, is what gives us hope (Amos 5:24). As we live in this broken world, the perspective of the "here but not yet" Kingdom gives us the ability to persevere.

The Bible also records stories of people who gave up their rights for the sake of a greater purpose. Abraham gave up his right to choose the land for the sake of a relationship (Genesis 13: 8 - 11); David gave up his right to fight for his kingdom and position, leaving it to God to work out His plans at the right time (2 Samuel 15:25, 26); Paul gave up his rights for the sake of the gospel (1 Corinthians 9: 1 -12) and used his rights as a Roman citizen, sparingly as and when required. Jesus gave up his rights as Son of God and became Son of Man to redeem the world (Phil 2:5-11). Balancing individual rights along with the rights of the community and being aware that fighting for our rights could be stumbling blocks for others challenges us to look at our own rights from a broader perspective.

Knowledge of these is good for those of us coming from a monotheistic and Judeo-Christian

world view to undergird our life and work. The challenge one faces is the question of how to live this out in the context of a majority community whose world views differ or right to health is influenced by various socio-cultural and religious factors.

Last week, a father brought premature twins into our emergency department and clearly and bluntly told the treating doctor, "I do not have resources to care for both the children, take care of the boy. Let the girl twin die." When a girl is a "lesser human," where current and future economic constraints (a girl child needs more resources to get her married) affect decisions, how should one respond? What happens to the rights of this "lesser human being?"

When the majority world view does not consider women as equal, how long and what would it take to change these views and, thus, change the lives of many women who live as second-class citizens? Would education and awareness alone affect change when these beliefs are part of deeper social, cultural, and religious beliefs?

Or when the caste system, a disabling myth which disfigures and disables a nation, influences every decision, what is the way forward? Where ingrained inequality has led to tacit acceptance of the caste system⁵ due to its undergirding religious and cultural roots, and has led to, among other challenges, a preventable epidemic of mortality among women and children, what does one do?

When inequality is ingrained into the socio-cultural and religious moorings of a society, when systemic structures perpetuate this inequality since religion and culture at times even supersedes law, how does one live and engage?

In this issue, Armstrong writes, "Rights, in general, are about individuals and fairness and are often connected with laws or legal systems, and so these sit very comfortably within a Guilt-Innocence culture. However, rights do not fit so easily within a Fear-Power culture or a Shame-Honor culture."⁶ When more than 75% of the world's population live in a Fear-Power or a Shame-Honor culture, how does one engage with

such communities? How can health care professionals who have a biblical understanding of rights that is undergirded by a Guilt-Innocence culture engage effectively and sensitively? Or when the rights of the unborn are considered as secondary to the rights of the woman, even by law, how does one respond? When law forces you to destroy the life of a disabled fetus since it is an economic burden to the nation, how does one respond?⁷

Armstrong was part of a team working for more than a decade with a community at risk for HIV that was marginalized and unable to access health care due to their high-risk behavior. An end of project evaluation revealed that communities were empowered to access health care services as their right, but the evaluation also revealed that some sections of the community were much more vocal and open about their high-risk behavior, at times, fighting for their rights to continue in such behaviors. The question arises — when rights of the marginalized become rights to continue engaging in a behavior that further mars the *imago Dei*, how does one respond? When empowering communities that are stigmatized and marginalized due to harmful behaviors to stand for their right to health care access, how does one respond when the communities fight for the right to continue in these harmful behaviors?

In such challenging contexts, will a responsibility frame work suffice instead of a right-based one? As Crouch in this issue writes,

An apparent conflict exists between the principles of individual human responsibility and certain aspects of health as a human right. A legitimate question arises when the determinants of health are partially or wholly within the decision-making powers of the citizen(s) themselves.⁸

In such communities, where decision making is not within the power of the individual, how can either the right or responsibility-based framework be lived out? Crouch, in the concluding section, writes, “An appreciation of fundamental rights can

go only as deep as the fundamental world-views of those involved.”⁸

It is important to recognize the complexity of cultural context and issues that affect or influence rights of the individual, along with a biblical understanding of human rights. We need to move from the knowledge of “theology of rights” to “reflective practice of rights.” We need to encourage reflections that consider the complexity of the issues, the context and the dominant world views that prevail in each context. We need to use such reflections to build the capacity of Christian health care professionals, and take responsibility for those who have no power to access their rights. We need to motivate each other to engage with knowledge, compassion, wisdom, and discernment, based on the learnings from such reflections.

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