

## FAITH OF OUR FATHERS

Human rights are the child and critical friend of faith

### FAITH IS FULL OF SURPRISES

A few years ago I was invited to give the [Alan Bray Memorial Lecture](#), in Soho. I chose the topic of [rights, diversity and Catholic social teaching](#). This was because my hosts were the [Roman Catholic Caucus](#) of the much broader [Lesbian and Gay Christian Movement](#).

What is going on here? An association of Gay Catholics?

It is no longer compulsory to be Catholic in Britain, much less Christian, much less religious – so why do people do it, why remain within a faith which (to put it mildly) appears to have little to say to them, indeed which seems at times downright antagonistic to their core sexual identity? Isn't the Pope and the Catholic Church as a whole supposed to be resolutely [anti Gay](#)?

The lecture was in the Anglican [St Anne's Church](#), but there is now a regular [mass for gay and lesbian Catholics](#) in [the Church of Our Lady and the Assumption](#) in the West End. True there are Catholic protestors but the Archbishop of Westminster [Vincent Nichols](#) is unequivocal in his support: 'anybody who is trying to cast a judgement on the people who come forward for communion really ought to learn to hold their tongue' is his robust response to critics.

It is the same with another apparently unequivocal Church position, the use (or non-use) of condoms – even the Pope now accepts (as priests and others on the ground have for years) that there is a moral basis for their use [in exceptional circumstances](#).

None of this supports the Catholic church of secularist caricature, epitomised by what some of the contributors to the excellent [New Humanist](#) had to say on the occasion of the [Pope's visit to Britain](#). If I knew more about the Moslem faith, the Hindu religion or indeed any other established belief structure I am sure I would be able to make the same sorts of points about them: perhaps some of our contributors can provide evidence of progressiveness in unexpected (religious) spaces?

*The first stage in understanding the role of religion in the protection of human rights is to acknowledge that humans are complicated and that easy answers to bald questions will rarely be the correct ones.*

Now of course it is obvious that secular antagonism to religion has not sprung out of nowhere.

### HISTORY MATTERS....

While it is right that we should hesitate before we jump to any conclusions about religion, this does not mean that we must avoid making any judgments at all.

- The modern history of human rights starts with antagonism to religion. The [French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen](#) of 1789 was part of a social revolution that saw the destruction of religion as an essential precondition of the birth of a new France. With the demolition of the great [Cluny Abbey](#) (established in 910 CE) the revolutionaries were serving notice of their intent, an intent to which many human rights advocates remain firmly committed to this day: religion and human rights are incompatible.
- Advocates of human rights prize reason above all else, and they see the major faiths as indelibly hostile to the power of the independent human mind to deliver answers to the problems posed by the world. They cannot understand how the Pope can claim to have rationality on his side (as he did in his controversial address at [Regensburg](#)) when what they know about the Church is that it [condemned Galileo](#) and wishes that many contemporary scientific advances (eg on [stem cell research](#)) were not occurring. Other religions place much less emphasis on reason than the Catholic Church, emphasising the authority of tradition or an ancient text (the Bible; the Koran), and this makes them even easier to criticise from a rationalist perspective.
- For many activists and campaigners, their belief in human rights is rooted in a deep commitment to individuality. A core truth for them (us?) is this idea of the autonomous individual, someone with life chances which are their own – and their own alone – to work through and make decisions about. From the human rights point of view, dignity is about being able to lead a full life, untrammelled by the constraints of others.

You can see immediately how this does not fit with taking instructions from others, priests, ayatollahs or whoever:

*Subjugating personhood to external dictate is profoundly alien to the whole human rights idea.*

- And then there is Marx: '[Religion is the opium of the people](#)'. You do not have to be a Communist or a socialist to agree with this: many democrats feel the same way. They see religion as an historic barrier to social progress, attacking progressive ideas, allying itself with the forces of the status quo, damning efforts to improve the lot of mankind, and then – long after they are defeated – scrambling to catch up by making a few progressive noises.

So what can we say with confidence?

One judgment we can certainly make is that the emergence of the human rights movement, out of [the Enlightenment](#) and further inspired by the French revolution, is that it defined itself in opposition to religion. Indeed it nourished on this hostility in order to make social progress.

.... BUT HISTORY MUST NOT RULE

What is true of the past is not *necessarily* true of the present. We must respect the past but not be slaves to it. In particular we must be careful about carrying on with the hostile addictions of our predecessors long after the necessity for them has faded away.

One of the core purposes behind this project has been to challenge easy assumptions about the history of human rights: see especially my account of this on [common track one](#). The meaning of human rights is worked afresh in every generation, and the idea's relationship with religion needs likewise to be constantly rejuvenated.

We should by now have left the useful hostility of the 18<sup>th</sup> century far behind.

- As the book by [Sam Moyns](#) that I discuss on [common track one](#) makes clear, religious thinkers had a strong influence on the drafting of the human rights charters that emerged after the Second World War. The notion of human dignity so prominent in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) was drawn from various faith systems and from its earliest days the main supporters of the [European Convention on Human Rights](#) were Catholic intellectuals intent upon rejecting Communism without having to plunge as a result into unregulated capitalism – with all the dehumanising effects that thoughtful Catholics rightly deplore.
- When the idea of human rights next took hold in the 1970s, one of its main strengths lay in its critique of the debilitating effects of Communist thinking on individual freedom. One important aspect of this oppression was widely and immediately understood to be the denial of the freedom to practice one's religion.

In this new human rights order, far from being the enemy, the right to religious observance – to live your life fully as a person of faith – has become [an important part of the human rights message](#).

It is because we believe this that we react with huge sorrow to the exodus of [Christians from Iraq](#), and also share the Pope's [dismay](#) at China's continuing refusal to allow true Catholic worship. We know people are losing part of what they are when coerced in this way, into either departure or silence.

- Modern scholarship is these days much more intelligent than heretofore about what is entailed in what it means to be 'an individual'. There is much less of a sense of the 'isolated monads' that Marx thought human rights described. Instead, partly by way of reaction to the insights of [communitarian thinkers](#), human rights have learned to see the individual as more than just him or herself alone, as connected to – made real by – the interactions that make a successful life possible. These include family and community and so on – but also clearly embrace one's faith and those with whom one shares one's beliefs.
- Since the end of the Cold War and the dramatic rise of capital ([common track one](#) again), it has been more obvious than ever that the human rights movement shares many of its core ethical perspectives with the major faith groupings. There is a common distaste for the debilitating impact of unregulated markets: both the Catholic Church (in the encyclical [Caritas in Veritate](#)) and the Archbishop of Canterbury (most recently in his [Christmas Day sermon](#) for 2010) have been uncompromising on this, as have other faith leaders I am sure – perhaps once again reader/contributors can supply details?
- For those who are concerned about social rights (discussed on [Track Nine](#)), the churches are now strong allies, taking radical positions on wealth accumulation and property ownership.

Their insistence on obligations of hospitality would put many human rights activists to shame.

Indeed if I am right in what I said about nature on [track four](#), human rights and religion are bedfellows in the working through of the benign human instincts that I say may be at the root of why it is we care for others.

## SO WHY THE CONTINUED HOSTILITY?

Religion is only dangerous to human rights when uncompromising versions of it threaten to win. The success of secularism and nationalism in Europe and further afield has meant that there is no longer space for theocratic ambitions on such a vast scale, so far as Christianity is concerned at least. What these churches have left is an ethic of right behaviour, a poor substitute for terrestrial power perhaps from their point of view but from the human rights side of things a very useful thing to have around. After all, this is a time when all post religious societies are running into difficulty with developing a common ethic that they can truly call their own. (I deal with this at the start of [common track four](#)).

But how true is it that all churches, all faiths have lost their power everywhere, that religious belief is in decline?

We only have to state the question to grasp how inaccurate is the assumption it questions. This is where my benign version of history runs into trouble.

Certain kinds of faiths are experiencing tremendous growth.

- A particular reading of Islam has gained immense ground since its first great triumph, the establishment in 1979 of the [Islamic Republic of Iran](#). This stresses certain ideas as foundational and outside history and rejects engagement with secular society and with humanist traditions within the Islamic faith.
- Evangelical Christianity is also on the rise, especially in South America and some parts of Africa. It is similarly committed to a text (in this case the Bible rather than the Koran) as a definitive mantra, the solution to all problems. Like the Islamists described above (whom they in so many other ways resemble as well) these Christians refuse to engage with any intellectual critique of their foundational texts, simply disregarding any difficulties that might arise from science, or the exigencies of translation, or the simple (but for them to be disregarded) brute facts of history.

Each of these faith blocs does operate in ways that are antagonist to human rights, whether it is in closing down all free discussion (epitomised by the [Salman Rushdie fatwa](#)) or claiming that certain humans deserve death because their country had sworn 'a pact to the devil' (as evangelist Pat Robertson [said about Haiti](#) after its earthquake at the start of 2010 had killed over a 100,000 people).

They are powerful, funded by Saudi or Iranian money or by American religious extremists.

Their appeal lies in the emptiness of the lives of so many to whom they speak;

- people rendered futile by the effects of globalisation, whose communities and whole way of life have simply melted away, leaving poverty and uncertainty in their wake
- societies labouring under authoritarian regimes which keep them in poverty while their leaders ransack their land for wealth
- men and women who have been wholly deprived of educational opportunity providing any kind of platform to grow as individuals

We call this sort of unreflective dogmatic kind of religion ‘fundamentalist’ and human rights people are right to oppose it, and to do so strongly. It is the opposite of what human rights should be about, being joyless, anti-rational and full of hate for the world outside its enclosed and suffocating space. It is also easily exploited by cynical leaders, whether they be ‘populist’ tyrants like [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) or millionaire ‘Televangelists’ like the execrable [Pat Robertson](#).

## THE RIGHT HUMAN RIGHTS BALANCE

Here is my agenda for the right set of relations between religious faiths and supporters of human rights.

- Proponents of human rights should embrace the religious instinct towards care and hospitality to the outsider, recognising in it an attitude to the world which is identical to their own, and which may indeed stem from a common natural propensity towards empathy for the stranger.
- Most religious persons and organisations work through this religious instinct in a way that resembles that of the human rights believer, particularly in the importance that both approaches accord to the primacy of human dignity.
- It is true that this idea of human dignity is worked through in different ways in different circumstances, and that the shape it takes in a religious context will not always be identical to (or even perhaps closely resemble) what the human rights people take it to mean.

This does not mean the religious and human rights movements are on opposite sides: *they are writing the same book, just using different language*

Where a religious perspective is engaged in this way, in a good faith fleshing out of what human dignity entails, then human rights believers need to be less quick to condemn and more open-minded to debate: humility is an important virtue in the search for truth

- Even where a religious perspective is fundamentalist in the sense identified above, it is perfectly possible to work with its believers on shared projects, while not committing to any kind of agreement on basics. It is even easier to do this – work together – where the instinct for hospitality and the primacy of universal dignity are agreed and the only differences lie in fleshing out what this primacy entails in specific contexts.
- The one exception to positive engagement is this: proponents of human rights should refuse to work with fundamentalist religious entities and individuals whose denial of individual dignity and equality of esteem is at the core of their faith and then this denial is aggressively

reflected in their work. It might be through violence or the preaching of hate. This is not the religious inclination but a distortion of it. Human rights believers must not only avoid but must seek to challenge such views, engaging in confident dialogue with a view to achieving change.

If we take this approach we can see that human rights supporters have much that they can still learn from religion. There is the persistence of the Gay Catholics in their religious observance for example – what are they telling us about the centrality of faith to identity? There is the commitment to human rights shown by many intellectuals from the Islamic tradition, so usefully brought together in a recent book by Professor William Twining ([Southern Voices](#)).

We hope to that the authentically religious will accept that they too have much to learn from human rights.

*Religion and human rights need each other – whatever the loudest voices on either side might tell us.*