

## TRACK THIRTEEN RESPONSES

### MUST WE FIGHT WITH FAITH?

Two questions kept bubbling to the surface in the course of the responses to this track.

*Is there a core conflict between faith perspectives and human rights?*

*How much should differences on faith issues affect the way those of us committed to human rights interact with religious believers?*

This is how Ronan McCrea put his point of view:

‘The crux of the difficult relationship between human rights and religion is that human rights place the utmost importance on the lives of humans as lived on earth while most religions believe that our life on earth is only of secondary importance and that, in the event of a clash between one’s earthly and divine interests, the divine interests should prevail, even at the cost of causing earthly suffering.’

I think Ronan overstates the point. Many religious systems are not as dependant on post-life ‘life’ as the Christians and the Moslems seem to be. And even for these faiths things are not always as they appear. For example, since about 90CE, Christians have had to get used to the fact that the world they know is *not* about to end. I imagine it is the same with other faiths that have had to get used to the fact that the ‘hereafter’ is more ‘after’ than ‘here’.

I agree with Sebastian that ‘for all faiths “life here” is at the very least a foundational element of the “life there”’.

This concentration on the earthly is not only because the Saviour has been slow in showing up. It reflects a deepening in the understanding of what it means to be ‘saved’, an understanding that consciously links faith to the transformation of the person here on earth – quite apart from what happens or doesn’t happen when you die.

So my answer to the first question is ‘No, when you get past outward appearances’.

Now, I don’t doubt that to the extent that religion does look at good behaviour in the here and now (as I am suggesting it does), this is not only because this world has not ended but also partly

on account of the success of secularism. From time to time you even get the feeling that some Christian believers are embarrassed about mentioning God and Jesus Christ. Better to talk social work rather than salvation – an extreme example of this, I thought, was Tony Blair, in his recent debate with Christopher Hitchens about religion on [BBC](#) – he seems still to be able [not to do God](#) even when he is defending Him (or Her).

## AN IMPORTANT IMBALANCE OF POWER

Now the second question, about faith-human rights interactions.

While human rights defenders need not be in conflict with religion, they should be unashamed about defining the terms of the discussion. As Carol Coulter says ‘there are limits to where the right to live your life as a person of faith can go.’ In our secular world, those limits are defined by pluralism and tolerance.

Here is Ronan again:

‘The only sustainable foundation for security for human rights in a world that is still strongly religious is to require religious individuals to internalize the reality of religious pluralism by accepting that it is illegitimate to found laws that will bind all on the basis of religious teachings alone. A further element to such internalization of the reality of pluralism must also be the recognition that the conscience rights of all are equal and conscience claims that happen to be religious in nature cannot by that reason alone claim greater exemptions from generally applicable laws.’

I agree.

*Faith can and should thrive but in a space shared with others not in some monochrome theocracy.*

If there is to be state recognition ‘for the resolution of marital disputes by Islamic courts’ and for ‘Jewish religious arbitration of marital disputes’ and so on (Carol again) then these need to be allowed only insofar as they do not undermine basic human rights protection, a point that the Archbishop of Canterbury himself made in his speech at the [Royal Courts of Justice](#) on this topic.

But I for one would not go the whole way with the full secular triumph: religion as a wholly private matter, like train spotting or stamp collecting (or sado-masochism). It needs to have an

outreach component – human rights law recognizes this in the qualified support it gives to proselytism. We should also acknowledge more than I think human rights defenders sometimes do the enormous value of the faith-based disposition in terms of delivering human rights goals: that was one of the main points of my essay and I stick by it here.

## TALKING TO FAITH

So what about this idea religious people have about a spiritual life beyond our understanding to which they (and they might say all of us) should pay homage? How much if at all should this put us on our guard?

Ronan is spot on in reminding us that religious believers commit to a faith structure which though they might not always talk about it (like Tony Blair) puts them in a very different position from non faith-based human rights advocates. Ronan is also right that this is as much the case with ‘mainstream’ as with ‘fundamentalist’ believers – that easy divide does not work here (and diminishes serious ‘moderate’ believers into the bargain).

Does this different position matter? Should this radically different perspective religious people have on the world unsettle secular human rights people? Or should human rights defenders be relaxed, even enthusiastic about it?

*I think that human rights defenders should talk about faith with as much easy, interest and confidence as religious believers talk about human rights.*

The point that is important is, I think, the degree of openness to dialogue that there is – in short much depends on the attitude of the two ‘sides’.

Let’s take the religious first. Richard Buck is right to highlight ‘dialogue among people of different faiths and among faith leaders’ and I’d add between faith communities and the secular as well. Here is Ronan again:

‘The key question is not whether those committed to human rights should cooperate with religious people who have similar commitments (I would argue that it is clear that they should do so), but rather, what attitude are religious people to take when, as will inevitably occur for some religions, their religious beliefs clash with the principles of equality, self determination and dignity that human rights cherish’

If the religiously-inclined can discuss their differences with secular human rights defenders against a background of a shared morality, then even large gulfs in perspective can be managed. I am not saying 'bridged' necessarily but managed. If the attitude of both sides is the same, if each is travelling in the direction of 'equality, self-determination and dignity', then there will be no need to sunder partnerships in other fields even where there are differences (and important differences) on topics of great seriousness. The key thing is a sharing of a common right attitude.

Ah I hear you say, few religions will share this attitude so there will be precious few religious people willing to talk to human rights people on this basis.

I think this is wrong. Many religious people and many strands in religious faiths (some central or quite central) share these principles, albeit on some particular points they produce very different answers than human rights secularists are used to.

I think Catholic attitudes to sexuality and abortion fit into this category – they flow from a shared belief in dignity albeit one which produces different outcomes in practice as between a Catholic and a secular human rights advocate. Catholics can see this and work with human rights activists, and of course do on a very large scale.

Many other religions contain within themselves strong strands that promote a human rights perspective which is very close to the secular. Sebastian puts it well: 'it is always open to a person of faith to seek an interpretation that accommodates instead of criminalizes, that accepts and tolerates, rather than condemns and expels.' These openings exist in many, many faiths. This can serve to narrow the range of Ronan's 'situations where religious followers are faced with conflicting demands between adherence to their faith and respect for human rights. ' Their version of their faith will have narrowed this gap. And such versions, as I say, are not necessarily wacky or off-the-wall: they can be quite mainstream.

And what about human rights secularists?

- How prepared are secularists to talk to religious believers about their faiths in an open, non judgmental way?
- How willing are human rights secularists to discuss (again in an open way) the fact that religious readings of dignity and equality can produce different outcomes than their own, on abortion for example or sexual freedom?

- How open are human rights secularists to engage in religious critiques of materialism and of what many religious think of as the permissive, self-centred culture that has grown up in our post-religious world?

We all need to remember that open dialogue is a two-way process.

## THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF VICTORY

I have already said that I think that, as Favio Farinella puts it, secular 'ideas must prevail.'

But this has to be without a hint of triumphalism.

Sure, I am with Carol that it is fine to hurt feelings but as to religious hatred, I do not think this is any longer acceptable. The church power that justified this hatred has long gone. Secularism should not be hateful. Anthony is right that the church is 'the very last to wake up to the progressive light.' True – but just as with my point just now about human rights defenders listening properly to faith communities, there is no point to winning if you become identical to the vanquished.

Far from hating religion, in our triumph we should support faiths, or tendencies within faiths, that share the universalistic commitment to dignity and esteem which is the core value of human rights, religions that take the right attitude – the point I have discussed above.

## BATTLE THE BOGUS

It goes without saying that we should reject engagement with faiths that are travelling in the opposite direction, towards sectarianism and exclusivity or collusion with corrupt power. Favio is right that 'the idea of human rights is opposed to any faith that is allied to power.' Fatima Ahdash is very strong here in her opposition to 'religious leaders [who] align themselves with dictators and become their theological mouthpieces, sanctioning their oppressive dictatorships.'

I agree with Fatima that, and on this:

'the devoutly religious need to speak up and show on whose side they align themselves with. Only when the devoutly religious (in the case of the Middle East it is mostly the devoutly Muslim) and the human rights activists join with each other can there be any hope for the respect of human right'

We must also be perpetually on our guard against religion as a business (Nick McGill) or 'globalised corporation' (Christina). And this includes being on our guard against the gendered exclusivity of faith (Christina) – the title of this [track](#) was a deliberate reminder of this problem: how many of us grew up with this [hymn](#)?

*When we are sure about the kinds of faiths with which we can do business we can be relentless in our opposition to those that not only differ from us in their policies but embrace principles explicitly antagonistic to our own.*

## CERTAINTY

This was a most interesting thread to the discussion.

Many of you feel that (as Holly Bontoft puts it) 'constant questioning and reconsideration' is central to human rights. Paul Bernal is not alone in identifying 'the idea of "certainty"' as a part of religion that gives him concerns. Zoe Fiander too is a bit worried by all the 'certainty/"one true way"' stuff in religion.

I agree – this is what puts many of you off.

But I think its exaggerated.

The kind of religious people with the attitude I described above, the set of values that makes them so amenable to human rights, are not so stupid as to be so sure.

*Doubt is a core part of every truly religious engagement.*

We can only speak of what we know. I was told this by the man involved. He was preaching to Pope John Paul II towards the end of his life. A private occasion, just a few people at the Mass. He said this: 'A Catholic is a person who wakes up an agnostic every morning and strives to believe.' The old Pope, hunched up and seemingly asleep, banged his fist on the table and shouted with terrible energy, 'exactly, that is what it is.'

Secularists can be overly certain too: look at how many are so sure that there is no God! I am with Sebastian when he makes this excellent intervention:

As for the lamentable fact that religion and human rights is subject to fundamentalism and closed-mindedness, well this is also true of economists, military strategists, car drivers, cyclists, –

fundamentalism is the other side of the human coin. It produces mistrust and confusion though so we should discard it.

## MARX AND FAITH

Thanks to Ivan Manokha for his comment that my 'argument that religion and human rights need each other is still valid, but it might be considerably enlarged by adding this historic dimension via the concept of ideology.' The rest of this post is really worth reading for the added depth it brings to our discussion.

Ivan doesn't say much about how religion functioned in the post feudal/capitalist world order – [liberation theology](#) has proved tempting to many whose culture and upbringing made Marxism either unknowable or unthinkable.

## DOES HUMAN RIGHTS *NEED* FAITH?

Perhaps I expressed this need too strongly at the end of my essay. Lee, Alex, Christina and Holly all picked me up on this.

Duygu Akdag puts it like this: 'Human rights doesn't need religious people, or atheists, or agnostics; it needs people who believe in its values and are prepared to work towards them.'

Maybe 'learn from' is better than 'need'. I agree with Sophia that as Christianity declines it needs human rights (in particular the guarantee of religious worship that human rights supports and on which it insists). But I am also with Sophia that 'Religious language is poetic, narrative and often moving. Its power to inspire sacrifice, so the suffering and galvanise action can easily be evidenced.' As Chris Garrigues says there are 'different ways that life is experienced and perceptions will continue to be rooted in each person's story.' I do think that human rights can learn from how complete is a successful faith's interaction with the whole person, how it caters so well to the fullness of their personality.

## TRAVELLING OR READING?

Last thought this week to Anthony J Langlois

'I really don't think we are writing the same book. I suspect the appropriate analogy is more likely to be the over used one of a journey – but in this case, the city of god and the city of

humanity are somewhat fortuitously to be found via roads which sometimes share the same river beds and mountain peaks. I hope that the shared parts of the journey can be joyous and cooperative ones.'

Anthony ends this lovely image with a caveat ' – but this happy fellowship does not persuade me that we are heading to the same destination.'

I guess I think we are, at least with those faiths which share with us our right attitude to humanity.