The Biblical Basis for Human Rights and Religious Freedom

By GODFREY YOGARAJAH and THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

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1. Human Rights and Christian Faith

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Man as Creation and Image of God

On December 10, 1948, many states signed the General Declaration of Human Rights passed by
the General Assembly of the United Nations. The declaration states that all human beings possess
the same dignity (Article 1) and forbids all discrimination due to race, color, sex, language, religion
or political conviction (Article 2). Because all men have the right to life and liberty (Article 3), both
slavery (Article 4) and torture (Article 5) are prohibited. All are equal before the law and may be
condemned only according to established law, only after being heard in a court of law (Articles 7-
11). All are free to emigrate and to choose their place of residence (Article 13), and to request asylum
in other countries (Article 14). Every human being is free to choose his spouse, and the family, as the
“natural and basic unit in society”, must be protected by the State and by society (Articles 16+26).
The Declaration also demands the right of private property (Article 17), the right to liberty of con-
science and religion, which includes the individual’s right to change his faith (Article 18), the right
of opinion and information (Article 19), the right to congregate and to form associations (Article 20),

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the right to vote (Article 21). Everyone has the right to security in social matters (Articles 22+25+28), to labor with just remuneration (Article 23) and to education (Article 26).

Closely related to the idea of human rights is the claim that all people have the same right to be treated as persons – whatever race, religion, sex, political persuasion or social or economic status they may be. What is the basis of human equality, if not the fact that all were equally created by God? Thus, a Christian argument for human rights must begin with the biblical account of Creation, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (Gen. 1:26-27). The fact that Man was created in the image of God plays a major roll in the relationships of human beings to each other. Genesis 9:16, for example, requires murder to be punished, for it injures the image of God. “Whoso sheddeth man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man.” (Genesis 9:6)

Creation exists for the glory of God and has its meaning from God. This fact holds all the more for the ‘Crown of Creation’, Mankind was created according to the divine order of Creation to fulfill the purpose given him by God. God made him ruler over the earth, but also gave him the responsibility for the preservation of the earthly creation. The psalmist writes, “Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field;” (Psalm 8:6-7).

For this reason, human rights include only those privileges which God has given Man, no other rights which mankind may choose or claim for himself.

Christians may not, therefore, automatically identify the human rights catalogs formulated by western countries with those in the Bible. Scripture prescribes the right to an orderly court procedure according to clearly stated laws, to the hearing of witnesses, to judges who have not been bribed and to legal defense, as we will see. Such legal proceedings cannot, however, be automatically identified with Western jurisdiction. Supposing they could be—with which system? The German system, the British, the French, the American? We all know that these systems are quite different! There is plenty of room for a variety of legal systems which differ due to the cultural and historical traditions of their people, yet still guarantee human rights.

The Christian Roots of Human Rights

No one disputes the fact that human rights, given to protect the individual, are derived from Christian thought. The General Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations, of December 10, 1948, clearly demonstrates its Christian roots. The bans on slavery and torture, the principle of equality before the law, the right to rest and recreation—as seen in the Sabbath or Sunday rest—come from Christian traditions and not by chance are the governments which confirm these rights and anchor them in their constitutions mostly in Christian countries. Even Karl Marx acknowledged this, for he rejected human rights as a product of Christianity (for example, Marx and Engels Works, Vol. 1).

No state and no legal system can survive without a minimum of common, and necessarily ‘metaphysically’ based values. A legal system assumes a value system, for law is derived from moral standards which exist prior to and outside itself.

The guarantee of human dignity assumes that Man is more than that which he perceives about himself. He cannot be comprehended by the means and methods of natural science. He is metaphysically open. The modern State, with its legal system, depends on requirements that it cannot itself guarantee.

Enlightenment or Forgiveness and Repentance?

According to the philosophies of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, which attempted to found human rights without God and against the Church, all Good, including human rights, could be derived from Nature and from Reason. Rousseau’s identification of ‘Reason’ and ‘Nature’ is peculiar to Enlightenment thought. The attempt to base human rights on Nature has failed, however, for no one can agree on the meaning of ‘Nature’ or on how it’s laws can be discovered.
Wolfgang Schild, professor for penal law, writes, “The Enlightenment cannot and must not be the last word, our last word. Its rationality and functionality must be taken to its limits, for social life with a dignity worthy of Man is otherwise impossible. Even and particularly penal law cannot limit itself to rational means in order to achieve peace and order at any price: it requires the recognition of the human dignity – even of the felon – as its fundament and its limit.”

The thought that human beings could be improved by education, and that human ills could be solved by intellectual enlightenment, is a basic problem of Greek philosophy, of Humanism and of the Enlightenment. The Humanist ideal of education owes its existence to the idea that morals could be raised through education, for it assumes that the individual does wrong only because he is ignorant or because he thinks wrongly, not because his will is evil and because he is incapable of doing good on his own strength. These philosophies try to reduce the ethical and responsible aspect of thought, words and deeds to the question of knowledge, which hold a man responsible, only when he knows what he is doing.

Yet we are surprised to learn that doctors smoke as much as laymen do, that people maintain unhealthy life-styles, and that women continually become pregnant in spite of a flood of information about birth control. We all know from our own lives, that knowing the right answer, even being convinced of it, in no way guarantees that we live accordingly. A politician who vehemently defends monogamy as the foundation of society in Parliament does not necessarily insist on marital fidelity in his private life, and is not immune to adultery or divorce.

The Bible teaches that human sin affects not only our thoughts, but also our whole being, and that above all, our wills, which are opposed to God, lead us to act and think falsely, so that more thought and consideration are in itself insufficient. We must clear up our old, sin-encumbered past. Christians believe that God Himself died in Man’s place, when Christ died on the Cross for our lack of love and our egotism. When we acknowledge that we cannot save ourselves by our own strength and our own reason, but rely on Christ's fulfillment of our penalty, we can overcome our evil will by faith in Jesus, and renew our will and our mind according to God’s will (Romans 1:20-25; 12:1-3). True renewal occurs when the power of God works in our inner selves; not through educational campaigns, but by God’s love and forgiveness.

**Human Rights Precede the State**

Human dignity and human rights are part of man’s being as God’s creation. Thus, the State does not create human rights, it merely formulates and protects them. Since the right to life belongs to the very essence of the human being, man does not receive them from the government, and no government has the right to decide that its citizens have no more right to live, but can be executed at the ruler’s whim. Nor does the State confer the right to have a family, for the State does not own the family, it merely acknowledges the duty implied in the order of Creation to protect marriage and the family.

There are, therefore, rights which existed prior to the State, and there are rights above the State, rights derived from nature, both from human nature and from the various types of human society. The government must respect these rights and accept the limitations implied by these natural, divinely given rights of the individual, the family, the employee (or the employer!) and other human social groups.

Since human rights are rooted in a moral code prescribed to the State, this code equally forbids a false appeal to human rights, because it also defends the human dignity of others. No one has the right to express his own personality through murder or arson, for example.

Human rights assume a State with limited powers and a law valid for all mankind, a law which limits the powers of government. Were this not so, man would indeed receive his rights from the State. The individual would then have only the rights and the claims to protection which his government assured. This is the socialist view, which leaves no place for criticism or correction of a State which has declared itself to be God.
The Meaning of Romans 13

The most important scripture about the role of the State is the thirteenth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, which was written by the apostle Paul, who brought Christianity to Europe and Asia in the first century AD: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For he is the minister of God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.” (Romans 13:1-7)

This text makes it clear that no one who opposes the State on principle can appeal to God’s authorization. On the contrary: he is opposing God’s law, and is rightly liable to legal proceedings (Rom. 13:2). Since the State has the duty to stem and to punish evil, Christians must do good, if they wish to avoid conflict. If a Christian does wrong, he is justly punished by the State. For the government, as God’s minister, has the duty of vengeance (13:4). As a result, the Christian pays his taxes and gives government officials proper respect (13:6-7).

But the question is, who defines what is good or evil? Did Paul leave this up to the State? Can the State declare anything good and demand it from its citizens? No. When Paul spoke of goodness, he defined it according to God’s will, and defined evil as that which was condemned by God’s law. “Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people.” (Proverbs 14:34).

The Bible thus gives us clear limitations and directions for taxes, military service and the police. John the Baptist, for example, told the tax inspectors and the police (One body served both as police and as military): “Exact no more than that which is appointed you” and “Do violence to no man, neither accuse any falsely; and be content with your wages.” (Luke 3:12-14).

From Paul’s statements, we can derive two essential thoughts:

1. The government can judge only what people do, not what they think. It is responsible for good or evil ‘works’, with doing. It is not the duty of the State to control all sin, only those sins whose activity can be observed and which damage public order, which the State has the responsibility to maintain and to protect.

2. The State may not distinguish between Christians and other people, i.e. between believers in different faiths, as long as they pursue their beliefs in a peaceful manner. Since God forbids partiality in legal matters, Christians must be punished just as severely as unbelievers when they break the law. The State cannot distinguish between Christians and members of other religious groups, for it may judge only on the basis of deeds.

Human rights are protective; they serve not so much to define the privileges of the individual, as to limit the powers of the State and of other institutions which deal with the lives of individuals. For this reason, Paul limits the State’s duties to specific aspects of life, rather than giving it the right to regulate and penalize all of man’s thought and life.

The State is not to be identified with society, as the socialist governments have done ever since the French Revolution. In such states, all aspects of society including the family and the Church are subject to the government. Society is more than the State. The State does not have authority over all parts of society.

On the Separation of Church and State

Just as the State may not dominate a church or a religion, it may not itself be subject to any church or religion. The separation of Church and State does not contradict the Christian faith, but arises naturally out of it, for the Bible makes it the duty of the State to enable people to live in peace, whatever they believe. It is the responsibility of the Church and of religion to point to eternity, to provide moral stability and to encourage man’s relationship to God.
The historian Eugen Ewig therefore speaks of the Old Testament Doctrine of Two Powers. Eduard Eichmann, also an historian, writing about the Old Testament division of powers between priest and king, “Along with the sacred Scripture, Old Testament views have become common property of the Christian West.”

Jesus confirmed this separation in the words, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Mark 12:17). Because this rule comes from God, Who is above the emperor, the religious institutions of God on earth, the organized People of God, are not above the emperor. The first priority is obedience to God, Who determines and limits what belongs to Caesar. Caesar has no authority to determine or limit what belongs to God. This does not, however, mean that the ruler is dependent on the Church, for God has given him the responsibility for all the people in his realm, not only for the members of one religious group.

The separation of Church and State does not mean that their duties never overlap, or that neither institution needs the other. On the contrary, the Church may advise the government and teach it God’s law, as Jehoida taught Jehoash. “And Jehoash did that which was right in the sight of the LORD all his days wherein Jehoiada the priest instructed him.” (2 Kings 12:2). It is sad that the modern Church has given up this critical office and prefers to howl with the pack.

The separation of Church and State does not become a war against Christianity until the State forgets its obligation to God’s law and begins to persecute the faith.

**God Knows no Partiality**

Centuries ago in the Bible, God made fair judicial proceedings a human right. A just judge is necessary to determine justice, and God is the proto-type of the just judge (Deut. 10:17-18; Psalm 7:9+12; 9:5; 50:6. See also Psalm 75:3+8), “for the LORD is a God of judgment” (Isaiah 30:18). He is the defender of justice. Those who judge fairly act in God’s Name. The Old Testament tells of the just king Jehoshaphat, “And said to the judges, Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for man, but for the LORD, who is with you in the judgment. Wherefore now let the fear of the LORD be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the LORD our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gifts.” (2 Chronicles 19:6-7).

A judge must be aware of the fact that God is observing him and stands by the innocent: “To turn aside the right of a man before the face of the most High, to subvert a man in his cause, the Lord approveth not.” (Lamentations 3:35-36).

For this reason the Bible has many directions concerning just, humane judicial proceedings. Prosecution, for example, requires at least two witnesses (Numbers 35:30; Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Mat. 18:16; John 8:17; Heb. 10:28; 1 Tim 5:18), so that the accusation is brought by two or three witnesses (Deut 10:17-18). Violent witnesses are not to be heard (Psalm 35:11).

The judge’s ruling must be completely impartial (Deut. 1:16; 2 Chr. 19:7; Prov. 18:5; 24:23; Job 13:10; Col. 3:25; Eph 6:9), for God is Himself impartial. (Deut 10:17-18). Only wicked judges are partial (Isa. 10:1-2; 3:9).

The ruling is to be made without prejudice (1 Tim. 5:21), after the judge has carefully examined all the evidence (Deut 17:4). “Execute true judgment,” God says in Zecharia 7:9; so that the ruling need not be repealed.

“If there be a controversy between men, and they come unto judgment, that the judges may judge them; then they shall justify the righteous, and condemn the wicked.” (Deuteronomy 25:1). Bribery must not influence the judge’s opinion. “A wicked man taketh a gift out of the bosom to pervert the ways of judgment.” (Proverbs 17:23). God is the great example. “For the LORD your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty, and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward:” (Deuteronomy 10:17). “Wherefore now let the fear of the LORD be upon you; take heed and do it: for there is no iniquity with the LORD our God, nor respect of persons, nor taking of gifts.” (2 Chronicles 19:7)

Scripture generally approves of gifts, when given to delight or to help others. Sometimes, the Bible realizes, gifts may even be necessary, if people are to achieve valid goals. The wise teacher tells us, “A man’s gift maketh room for him, and bringeth him before great men.” (Proverbs 18:16) and “A gift in secret pacifieth anger: and a reward in the bosom strong wrath.” (Proverbs 21:14). Should an
innocent person be confronted with corrupt officials, he has no hope of achieving perfectly legal goals. If he has no opportunity of overcoming this corruption in any other way, he can get his rights with gifts. Only when he buys injustice, is he himself guilty of corruption. He who is forced to bribe others will certainly strive to eliminate corruption, particularly in the Church, or in other religious institutions.

For this reason, there must be no double standard, such as one set of laws for the wealthy and another for the peasants. The Old Testament required the same penal system for both nationals and for foreign residents: (Exodus 12:49). “Ye shall do no unrighteousness in judgment: thou shalt not respect the person of the poor, nor honour the person of the mighty: but in righteousness shalt thou judge thy neighbour.” (Leviticus 19:15). Because God defends “the cause of the poor,” (Prov. 29:7) and “the cause of the poor and needy.” (Prov. 31:8) enjoins us, “Open thy mouth for the dumb in the cause of all such as are appointed to destruction. Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy.”

The Bible thus measures the justice of a country by its protection of the weak. Not only the condition of the wealthy or the ruling class, but also the condition of the simple citizens is to be considered. Not only the condition of the State Church is significant, but also the condition of the smaller Christian groups. Not only the condition of the judges with money and power to defend their rights, is important, but also the condition of the poor, the widows and the orphans in court.

God is the Creator and the Lord of all mankind. He wishes us to treat with each other as His image and His creatures—human beings dealing with human beings, not animals with animals.

2. The Creator desires human rights

THOMAS SCHIRMACHER

It would help the Islamic world if it would give less attention to the secular character of human rights, which it finds threatening, and would more heavily emphasize the authorization Judaism and Christianity give to human rights as coming from the Creator. The Islamic world would be better served by seeing how human rights are anchored in the nature people have as beings created by God. Why should a Muslim not be able to agree to the following three quotations?

In the American Declaration of Independence, dating from 1776, one reads the following: “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness — That to secure these Rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed . . .”

In the Bill of Rights for the State of Virginia, dating from 1776, one finds the following in Articles 1 and 16: “That all men are by nature equally free and independent and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity. “That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience; and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity toward each other.” (At this point one would naturally have to replace “Christian” with “Muslim” or “God-fearing” if it were to apply to Muslims.)

In the discussion about Germany’s basic law in the Parliamentary Council, a Christian representative said: “There are rights prior to and above the state which arise out of nature, out of the nature of humanity, and out of the various human communities which the state must respect. All authorities of the state find their limits at the point of these natural rights willed by God for the individual, families, communities, homelands, and professional associations.”

2 Dr. Seebohm in the second meeting of the Parliamentary Council on September 8, 1948, quoted in Eckart Busch, „Das Menschenbild in der Verfassung der Bundesrepublik Deutschland,” 4-27 in: Evangelisches Kirchenamt für die Bundeswehr (ed.). Von der Würde des Menschen. Beiträge aus der Militärseelsorge 36 (Mai 1986). Evangelisches Kirchenamt für die Bundeswehr: Bonn, 1981, 8.
Or let us think of the many authors who defend the idea that human rights presuppose faith. One does not have to follow them in order to be in favor of human rights, but for billions of religious people this is the simplest way to human rights. Let us again choose three quotations:

“The liberal (civil rights and liberties and rights of equality) basic rights, in particular the classical civil rights and liberties, were viewed as inherent, natural, eternal, divine, prior to the state, and binding for the drafters of constitutions. For that reason they were thought to be absolutely unalterable, indissoluble, inalienable, unable to lapse, and inviolable rights. That there are such unwritten basic human rights which can be stifled by the state but which can be neither created nor abolished by the state ‘is something which is not to be demonstrated or refuted but rather only believed or disavowed’ . . .”

The German legal theorist Christian Starck writes: “The guarantee of human dignity assumes that the individual is more than he knows himself to be. It cannot be fully grasped by means of rational science. It is metaphysically open.” “Discussions up to this point have shown that in terms of law, the modern state lives on the basis of presuppositions which the state itself cannot guarantee.”

The Swiss legal expert Peter Saladin has rightly pointed out, “Science ends at this point, and faith begins. Every attempt to justify human rights has to necessarily rest upon a confession of faith.”

For many religious people, and they account for the large majority of the world’s population, it is difficult to understand how people reject global ethics in the sense of a created order as intolerant but are still able to make human rights the sole individual moral standard.

**Christian roots?**

That human rights as protected rights have Christian roots has repeatedly been advocated. As Wolfgang Fikentscher sees it, “there can be no doubt that human rights as we understand them today have a Christian origin, notwithstanding their politically frail and tragic early forms.”

In his groundbreaking investigations on the pre-history to the Declaration of Human and Civic Rights of 1789, Georg Jellinek defended the position that modern human rights developed from the constitutions of early states in the United States shaped by Christianity in general and Calvinism in particular. Furthermore, he defended the stance that all human rights developed from the right to religious freedom and freedom of conscience that was gradually initiated through the Reformation. The discussion surrounding this thesis is ongoing up to this day, whereby there are definite advocates as well as opponents of this point of view.

Arthur F. Holmes wrote regarding human rights: “Correctly understood, it is, however, a concept the cause of which is through and through theistic and Christian.” Even Karl Marx supported this

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4 From the Greek ‘meta’ = over, beyond and after ‘physis’ = nature, i.e., supernatural, standing above nature.


notion: "Human rights as the mere protection of human ego is something Marx sees as a product of Christianity and therefore rejects along with Christianity."12

This is not to say that Christianity has throughout history more strongly respected human rights and implemented them or that there is a straight line from Jesus to human rights. Christian Starck, however, has correctly written in the Juristenzeitung (a specialist journal for legal theorists): “Failures of the Christian church against human rights ... do not refute the origin of human dignity as coming from Christianity.”13

It is also the case that Christianity – with some exception for the large orthodox churches – has its easiest time with human rights having a character resting above religions and secular notions. As far as Klaus Tanner is concerned, the notion of human rights is simply “the decisive intersection between efforts within the church and outside the church for designing a human ethos as a foundation for political activity.”14

The major churches

Most major churches did not champion human rights until after the experiences of the Third Reich, i.e., the time when human rights first became the starting point for political thought. According to Josef Punk, churches shifted to the ideas behind human rights because they did not represent a prescription for a new atheistic vision of society – with practically its own religion – but rather became “simply the final court of appeal in order to ensure and protect individualized designs against an overpowering state.”15 Up to that time, the notion of human rights had been so closely identified with the Enlightenment and its struggle against the church that the church preferred to stay with its own description of human dignity.

As far as it relates to the Catholic Church, this view seems to apply. Emanating from the human rights ideas in England and America, human rights were acknowledged much sooner in Protestantism since along with their Christian justification they became the new foundation for the state in the USA. At that time such ideas had not yet taken hold in the Catholic Church.

One can agree with Punt that Christian teaching in the Middle Ages was only unaware of universal human rights due to a situation where instead of human rights a universal sense of justice was taught. This universal sense of justice stood above the state and set a direction for all of public life.16 The state and the Church were subject to God and universal justice and were measured against these. It was not until Nicolo Machiavelli (1469-1527) that the sovereign state unfastened itself from its attachment to divine law or to natural law17 and declared that the state itself was the supreme lawmaker and the supreme power and did not have to orient itself towards anyone.

Gerhard Ritter views it similarly. He summarizes as follows: “Christian natural law doctrine of medieval Scholasticism primarily had its historical significance in establishing moral standards and the idea of an eternal order of justice above the state – a concept of justice and peace which all earthly rulers had to serve.”18

Christianity and the Enlightenment

There is life in the old dog yet, as the saying goes. Natural law, which had long been buried in Christian theology and frowned upon in philosophy since the time of Immanuel Kant, is

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11 E.g., Marx Engels Werke, Bd. 1, 362ff.
13 Ibid., 460 (with additional literature).
15 Punt. Idee, 176.
16 Punt. Idee, 33-36.
17 Punt. Idee, 70.
experiencing a cheerful comeback in human rights discussions. It does not matter that the large
top majority continues to maintain the idea that natural law is obsolete or that a small but growing
minority wants to officially have natural law resurrected in a modern form. The fact appears to me
to be that the thought of human rights without the Christian-Enlightenment pre-history of natural
law – as a universal law standing above all other law and prescribed by God or by the essence of
nature itself, by which, ultimately everything is measured ("being responsible before God and
mankind") – would never have been born.

In any case, human rights are first of all a product of European intellectual and religious history
with the corresponding offshoot of European immigrants in America. A good example of how
Christian and secular aspects intermingle for the benefit of human rights is Martin Luther King, Jr. It
is known to only a few in Europe that King was not only a pastor and theologian but also held a
doctorate in sociology.

Other worldviews trailed with their own justifications for human rights, but much later and not
nearly in any manner that saw it permeate into the majority of adherents of these worldviews.

The existence of human rights is thus principally a Christian concept which is rooted in the
towering dignity of each individual person as an image of the Creator. Admittedly, what applies in
the case of democracy is that the modern human rights perspective has come about via a
secularization of Christian and even particular Calvinistic notions. That is to say, the understanding
of human rights has become a commingling of Calvinism and the Enlightenment.

Incidentally, the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century indeed saw a direct and undisputable
improvement on the human rights front, for instance in the abolition of torture or witch trials.
However, there were at the same time also many human rights violations trailing in the wake, in
particular due to arbitrary measures taken in the age of revolution, due to the existence of
Enlightenment absolutism, and through the massive increase in power and influence on the part of
the state.

Otfried Höffer views human rights as the result of a combination of Judeo-Christian and Greco-
Roman notions, mediated by Enlightenment considerations.\(^{19}\) Certainly there is also a problem here
nowadays, as for instance one constitutional commentator observed: “In any case, a uniform
justification of basic rights is not possible from the viewpoint of intellectual history since there are
‘ostensibly irreconcilable, contrasting elements’ . . .”\(^{20}\)

I would like to venture the thesis that convinced atheists, practical atheists, nominal Christians,
and secularized Christians in our country – and that encompasses the broad general public in our
country – live with human rights as a fruit of Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Western culture
because they fare very well with them and otherwise simply do not think about where human rights
come from. This is not to say that committed Christians automatically think more about this.

**A Christian justification**

For most Christians today human rights are a strung together chain of natural certainties, even if
this would perhaps have been different 300 years ago. The Christian foundation of human rights is in
the first instance the following: People, indeed all people and not only Christians, are God’s
creations and images of God and for that reason possess an incredible dignity which precedes all
other things. This dignity is not dependent upon how the individual person stands in relation to
God, whether or not the individual is a Christian. The South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu has
written: “This is the foundation of the egalitarian concept in the Bible: everything belongs to God.
And all people are equal before him. That is an intoxicating assertion. No political ideology could be
more radical.”\(^{21}\)

What is at the basis of the notion of human rights is that all people have the same rights to be
treated as people irrespective of their differences in race, religion, gender, politics, or

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19 Otfried Höffer. “Christliche Sozialethik im Horizont der Ethik der Gegenwart,” From Politik und
Zeitgeschichte (Supplement to Das Parlament) Nr. 20/91 dated May 10, 1991, 36-44, here 36-41.
20 Hermann von Mangoldt, Friedrich Klein. Das Bonner Grundgesetz. op. cit., 57 (Block omitted).
36-42, here 41.
social/economic status. So where is humanity's equality predicated, if not in God's having created everyone? For that reason, every Christian justification of human rights begins with the creation narrative in the first two chapters of the Bible in which the following is stated: "Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.' So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." (Genesis 1:26-27)

Christians thereupon derive from the Bible the idea that God does not show partiality. Indeed, that applies in the church, but it applies above all to the state and that which is under its jurisdiction: Judges must independently and incorruptibly scrutinize what is the case, not show partiality, and not judge on the basis of the accused's religion. A murder is not made less atrocious if a Christian commits it. The Old Testament teaches that the judge should neither favor a wealthy individual nor should the judge favor a poor individual just because he is poor. Justice is to be dispensed without any partiality.

Added to this is the fact that in Judaism and Christianity, throughout the entire Old and New Testaments, the entire perspective with regard to the earthly world is a perspective comprised of legal structures. (Muslims can track with this, while Hindus and Buddhist do so to a much lesser degree.) The state is a constitutional state, and the political order is a legal order. What liberal Protestantism at one time derided or criticized because it desired a form of Christianity free from all laws, has long since become the structure of our everyday life: Collective life is held together by laws and statutes. Every power which is installed somewhere is derived from law. And this was already the case in Israel when other cultures hardly knew of such a thing.

Emerging from this is the fact that everyone, and that meant above all the king in the Old Testament, was subject to law, so that today the state itself is subject to law. It is not so striking for us when we read that the prophet Nathan confronted David on behalf of justice. This occurred after David had had an officer liquidated in a subtle and pseudo-legal manner so that he could have the officer's wife. But in much of our history the supreme ruler was not subject to law. For example, Kaiser Wilhelm II wrote in the Golden Book of Nuremberg: "I am the law." His father Kaiser Wilhelm I claimed, when it came to the matter of a constitution: "I won't let a piece of paper come between God and me."

The notion of a federal constitution, including the concept of the rule of law, is actually borrowed from the Old Testament notion of Torah and has increasingly been secularized since the seventeenth century in legal and state language ("federal republic," "confederation," "federal constitutional court"). In the first instance, the thought is absurd that the highest authority of a country is only a piece of paper. You can put anything on paper. Paper cannot defend itself. Only out of the Judeo-Christian tradition can one understand that this piece of paper stands for a law to which every individual is subject and is that which holds the society together. It is not actually the king, nor the emperor, nor the pope, who is the highest authority, but rather the written statutory law. The authority for power is anchored in supreme law.

According to the Biblical-Christian understanding, the state itself is subject to law. From a Christian point of view, Romans 13 has to do with human rights because the state derives its legitimacy through ensuring justice and combating injustice. For this reason Christians are obligated to let themselves be ruled by non-Christian governmental authorities. The state about which Paul is speaking in Romans 13 is indeed that of the Roman emperor. For starters, Paul primarily sees the rule of law in the Roman Empire, which he himself used diligently. In terms of worldly justice, Christians are subject to the state. Paul even bluntly described the non-Christian state as "God's servants" when they punish a Christian who does wrong. (Romans 13:1-7) That Christians have often handled this completely differently in the course of history does not change anything about the fact a Christian does not have to bend his faith out of shape if he now lives in a secular constitutional state.

What naturally derives from that is an automatic separation of church and state. When Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" – he also knew that the Roman emperor was not a Christian – "and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:21), he automatically conveys the loyalty Jews had to the state to loyalty to a non-Jewish state. The separation of church and state presupposes a religion which
desires this. The German-speaking countries can be happy that the majority religion advocates this separation and does not combat it.

There are critics who maintain that human rights philosophy has the status of a state religion or a civil religion around the world and especially in Germany. This is actually nothing other than a secular variation of its Christian roots. Haimo Schulz Meinen writes for instance:

“In connection with Durkheim’s theses, it [is] possible to evaluate the notions of human rights as intellectual advancement of the Christian cultural tradition.”

3. The Biblical Basis for Religious Freedom

GODFREY YOGARAJAH

Religious freedom

Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states that, “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” The UDHR recognizes that human beings are endowed with reason and conscience and that they should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 18 of the UDHR states that, “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” Thomas Jefferson, commenting on the right to religious freedom, famously stated that it is “The most inalienable and sacred of all human rights.”

Creator God

As seen clearly in scripture, religious freedom is rooted in human dignity and freedom. We see this demonstrated in the character of God and also in the creation of man in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Therefore, since every human being is created in the image of God, he possesses inalienable and innate dignity, worth and respect that no one can rightly take away on any pretext. This is echoed beautifully in Psalms 8:4-8 that states; “what is mankind that you are mindful of them, human beings that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor. You made them rulers over the works of your hands; you put everything under their feet: all flocks and herds, and the animals of the wild, the birds in the sky,” and the fish in the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.

This foundation and irreversibility of human rights and dignity are an inherent part of humanity. These rights cannot be taken away, or be manipulated by anyone – neither individuals nor the state. These rights are rendered to every person on virtue of them being human beings. As such, these rights cannot be ‘given’ nor ‘taken’ by any actor. Rather, they are to be enjoyed by all human beings.

Where religious freedom is restricted, there is a dehumanization of human dignity and a distortion of the image of God in man. It marks a violation of human worth, respect and dignity. However, more severely, it inscribes an insult on the Creator and an assault on His creation that pronounces human beings as both free and equal. Moreover, human beings were created with free will and equipped with the freedom to choose. Therefore, it is also possible to trace religious freedom to the biblical principal that man was created with a free will.

The fall

Events at the Garden of Eden, in Genesis chapter 2, further demonstrate the Creator’s willingness to allow humankind the freedom to choose. In Genesis 2:16-17 Adam and Eve were granted the choice to eat from any tree, except, however, the tree of knowledge of good and evil. We see here that man was allowed the choice to either follow their Creator or not follow him. The story of Cain
and Abel is another case in point. Cain kills his brother Abel because of a religious act and is condemned by God. Similarly, today, in the name of religion, people all across the globe are being killed, tortured and imprisoned for what they choose to believe.

Salvation

In God’s plan of salvation beginning in the Old Testament in Noah’s invitation to the society of his time to be saved from judgment, to God sending his only son to redeem mankind in the New Testament, we see a marked absence of compulsion in the redemptive work of God.

In God’s plan for salvation, in spite of Him actively attempting to draw men and women back to himself, there is no violation of humanity’s freedom to choose between God and their sinful nature.

Similarly, Jesus, too, extends the freedom of religion to those whom he came in contact with. In Matthew 19:16-23 after a brief conversation with Jesus, a rich young ruler chooses to walk away from following Christ. The important point here is that Christ lets him go. Jesus does not force belief in him. Likewise, we see that faith is commanded in scripture but never coerced.

The Church

Scripture also makes it clear that God’s freedom of choice is not only with individuals but with his bride, the church as well. In Revelation 3:14-22, Jesus rebukes the Church in Laodicea for their spiritual failings. In verse 16 he declares them lukewarm. However, notably, Jesus does not compel them to change. Rather, he present them an opportunity to repent. This is demonstrated in verse 20, when Jesus states, “Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone who hears my voice and opens the door, then I will come in.” We see here a choice presented to them to either accept him or reject him; a choice to decide their own fate.

Justice

Justice as an attribute of God is a strong theme in the Old Testament. Deuteronomy 10:18 states, “He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the foreigner residing among you giving them food and clothing”. In Jeremiah 7:6, God cautions the Israelites “not to oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm”. The alien and the foreigner represent a different way of life and faith to the Jews. However, God cautions the Israelites to not oppress, nor shed innocent blood but to respect them and their differences and to care for them. Scripture, however, goes beyond the principles of justice and freedom, equality and charity.

Love

In Jesus Christ we see the dearest words and deeds of love. In Matthew 22:39, Jesus is asked by an expert in the law, which is the greatest commandment in the Law? Jesus replies “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” and, notably, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

In Matthew 7:13 and Luke 6:31, Jesus echoes the Law of Moses and the teaching of the prophets when he states, “do unto others as you would have them do unto you”. An extension of this ‘golden rule’, therefore, to the realms of religious freedom would mean that, if we desire that our freedom of religion be respected and treated with respect, worth and dignity, we should, in turn, extend the same courtesy to others. In his life and ministry, Jesus demonstrated this important virtue of love for humanity both in word and deed, to the point of death, even death on a cross. God through Christ sacrificed himself for all humanity, granting everyone equal access to salvation.

Jesus Christ reveals that the essence of the Old Testament law is the commandment “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind”. This is the first and greatest commandment. The second is “Love your neighbor as yourself”. These two commandments sum up the relational core of Christianity. In Matthew 5:44, Jesus commands his disciples to love

24 Psalm 146:9; 94:6 Jeremiah 7:6; Zechariah 7:10; Deuteronomy 10:18
your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. As such, we see that the principle of love is to be extended even to those who are hostile and set on causing you harm. This commandment also includes the well-known principle to “do no harm”. Therefore, the biblical answer to any possible victimization is love.

The bible is also rich in its emphasis on the divine purpose of human well-being. Three words, in particular, seem to summarize its teachings; Dignity, Equality and Responsibility.

John Stott puts it beautifully when he states;

Here then is a Christian perspective on Human rights. First we affirm Human dignity, because human beings are created in God’s image to know Him, to serve one another and be stewards of the earth, therefore they must be respected. Secondly we affirm human equality because human beings have all been made in the same image by the same creator, therefore we must not be obsequious to some and scornful to others, but behave without partiality to all. Thirdly, we affirm human responsibility because God has laid it upon us to love and serve our neighbors therefore we must fight for their rights, while being ready to renounce our own in order to do so.25

Responsibility, therefore, is at the heart of religious liberty and freedom. A Christian, hence, is free to take greater interest in his or her duty to protect the dignity and liberty of others than his or her own rights.

**Religious freedom as the first freedom**

Religious freedom is believed to be the most important of all other freedoms. In fact, religious freedom is considered to be the cornerstone of human rights; the foundation on which all rights hinge. Based on this understanding, the Americans refer to religious freedom as the first freedom. However, since, it is the cornerstone of all other rights, the violation of religious freedom also results in the violation of other freedoms such as the freedom of thought, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech and the freedom of association etc.

**Conclusion**

A universal principle of utmost value, religious freedom lies at the heart of a just and free society. Moreover, religious freedom is the source and synthesis of all human rights. This truth has also been embodied in many Christian statements by different ecumenical bodies.

The declaration on religious freedom issued by the Vatican, “Dignitatis Humanae” argues, “The right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person...not in the subjective disposition of the individual but in his very nature.”26

Church father Tertullian in the second century stated, “It is a human law and a natural right that one should worship whatever he intends, the religious practice of one person neither harms nor helps another. It is no part of religion to coerce religious practice, for it is by free choice not coercion that we should be led to religion”.27

In the 2010 Cape Town Commitment, evangelical Christians of the Lausanne movement declared, “Let us strive for the good of religious freedom for all people. This requires advocacy before governments on behalf of Christians and people of other faith who are persecuted.”28

The World Council of Churches in its Commission on the Churches on International Affairs study report on Freedom of Religion and the Rights of Religious Minorities states, “Where the right to religious freedom is denied, human development is also impaired. The church promoting and defending religious freedom is an important part of its values and ethos of upholding human dignity and the human rights of every individual.”

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27 *To Scapula* (2.1-2)
4. Christian Arguments for Religious Freedom

THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER, GODFREY YOGARAJAH

A) A Christian Argument in a Nutshell

Out of this history, and especially since the Reformation, several core arguments for religious freedom have become crystalized in the Christian tradition and are now widely recognized. We are not discussing here how long it took the different branches to reach those conclusions, but try to summarize the typical arguments for religious freedom used today.

Religious freedom for Christian churches is not only a political guideline for Christians. Rather, it arises from the Christian faith itself and is part of its nature on every level, in private, in the church, in every day public life, in society at large and in politics.

This is due to the fact that, according to Christians, God has created all people as his image bearers (Genesis 1:26 – 27; 5:1). This does not only apply to Christians, but to all those created by God, for which reason everyone has the same human dignity and human rights which derive from the image bearing nature all people possess. Thus, if religious freedom is part of Christian teachings, it applies not only to a certain group of Christians, or to all Christians, but to all humans, no matter what they believe or do not believe.

This starts with the nature of the relationship to God, called ‘faith’ in the Bible and Christianity. God desires – as is repeatedly stated in the Old and New Testament – to be wholeheartedly loved, not worshiped as a result of coercion. The innermost orientation of the conscience and heart of individuals may not and cannot be compelled.

Is a forced conversion a conversion? All Christian confessions agree that a conversion has to be deeply personal, ultimately a considered move of the heart. A forced conversion is not something we want and not something we can accept. A forced conversion is no conversion at all because it does not create faith and trust in God, but just blind obedience to outward things.

Because faith in God cannot be forced, God also prohibited Christians from executing any type of penalty against its critics and from punishing people for their ‘unbelief.’ Even Jonah had to experience that God was more merciful than Jonah himself, who would have preferred to see judgment come over Nineveh (Jonah 4:1-10). And it was Jesus who rejected the thinking of his disciples to call fire down from heaven upon the villages which did not welcome them (Luke 9:51-56). With that said, Christians throughout all time have been refused the right to punish other people for rejecting Jesus or the gospel (or any of our convictions).

But if Christians or the church may not punish people, if they believe otherwise, what about the state? The state, with its monopoly on the use of force, has the mandate to protect human rights, including the right to freedom of religion, and not to promote the Christian faith or another faith. Whoever looks at which tasks the New Testament assigns to the state sees that the expansion or promotion of a certain religion is not included among them. However, peace and justice for all are included. Christians are subject to the state in matters relating to worldly justice. Indeed, Paul is able to straightforwardly describe the non-Christian state as “God’s servants” if they punish Christians who do evil (Romans 13:1-7). That Christians in so-called ‘Christian’ nations have acted differently in the course of history does not change anything about the fact that a Christian does not have to twist his faith if he advocates religious freedom. Rather, this is something which arises naturally from his or her faith.

The state has to protect Christians insofar as it has to protect everyone who does good, and in its efforts to promote justice and peace it has to restrain all those who plan or carry out violent acts, regardless of whether they are religiously motivated or not. Christians call for no more of a right to religious freedom for themselves than for others. The killing of a Muslim or a Baha’i for the sake of his or her faith is as terrible as the killing of a Christian. Christians want to “live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18), not only with people like themselves.

What arises naturally is an automatic separation of church and state. When Jesus said: “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” he knew that the Roman emperor was not a Christian (Matthew 22:21). He automatically transferred the loyalty of the Jews towards their state
to loyalty towards a non-Jewish state. The separation of church and state actually presupposes a religion which wants this, and former Christian, Western countries can be happy that the majority religion advocates this separation and does not fight against it.

The state has to guarantee peace and justice for all its citizens, no matter what they believe. Christian justice is not a justice that privileges Christians, but a Christian justice is human justice for all humans alike. The state has to assure, and the religious citizens have to help the state in this, that the ‘competition’ between religions and non-religious worldviews, and the ‘competition’ of different branches within a religion is not carried out by violence or the pressure of bribery but is left to peaceful intellectual discussion among mature people. Such peace between religions of all kinds produces – as research shows – in return a more peaceful and prosperous society, while suppression of religious freedom produces violent religious movements of all kinds and bans religious minorities from economic participation, education and science with devastating results for every society.

B) Religious Freedom and the Truth question

At no time in human history has there been a country in the world which has produced peace between religions so that these religions have come to agreement on their differences and have united with each other or have dispensed with every claim to truth. Normally it has been and is precisely the other way around. When religions decide to dispense with violence, coercion, or political pressure, this serves to produce a platform upon which religious groups exist alongside each other in spite of all the differences and are able to enter into dialog with each other. In doing so, each religious community exercises its faith to the full extent and is allowed to spread its faith. Furthermore, all the members of such a society are free to choose which religion they want to follow and which religion they do not want to follow.

Also, in the case of Christianity and Islam, it is apparent that unity has not been achieved between the different theological schools in every detail. One can, for instance, think about the differences between Shiite and Sunni Islam or between Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic Christianity. Whenever these different schools are in the position to peacefully coexist in the same country, the reason is not because they agree about everything. Rather, it is either because they have been forced by the state to peacefully coexist (which hardly represents a permanent solution) or because they have themselves decided to limit their differences to the area of theology and to discussions about the faith and have decided to not argue it out in the political realm.

Peace in the political realm cannot be required via theological uniformity. On the contrary, it is obvious that individual governments can also conduct war against each other when they share the same religious convictions. Instead, we have to acknowledge that religious freedom is a basic right for all people, in particular for those, however, who are at variance with our own convictions.

In its resolution for religious freedom, the World Evangelical Alliance expresses it as follows: “The WEA differentiates between advocating the rights of members of other or no religions and endorsing the truth of their beliefs. Advocating the freedom of others can be done without accepting the truth of what they believe”.29

C) Eight Propositions

The ten following propositions try to sort typical arguments used from the Bible in favour of freedom of religion and belief. They are a result of searching the major documents on the topic of the Catholic Church, the World Council of Churches and the World Evangelical Alliance. All three embrace religious freedom, as is shown by the joint 2011 document “Christian Witness in a multi-religious World”, and all use similar lines of Biblical arguments, as this document proves.

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1. Thesis: Ethics and mission belong together. Christian witness is not an area where ethics do not apply; it requires an ethical foundation so that we truly do what Christ has instructed us to do.

In 1 Peter 3:15-17 one finds a form of complementarity. On the one hand, there is the necessity for witness if not apologetics (see the Greek word “apologia,” which originally was a speech in court presented in one’s defense). On the other hand, there is the necessity for “gentleness and respect,” respect for the dignity of the other person: “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason [Greek: apologia] for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect . . .” The dignity of a person does not make us hide our hope but rather speak about it clearly, explain it, and defend it. And yet, questions behind which lie bad intentions, to which we give clear answers, can never permit us to treat the dignity of our discussion partner with contempt. Both sides complement each other, and they represent indispensable fundamental building blocks of our faith.

According to 1 Peter 3:15-17, people do not speak directly with God when they speak with us. On the one hand, we can certainly be God’s ambassador and bear witness about the hope which is in us. And yet, on the other hand, we are also only humans saved solely through God’s grace and not due to our own virtue. We desire to see people find peace with God, receive his forgiveness, and trust God as the sole truth. However, they have not sinned against us. They should not bow before us, and we are not the truth and are not in possession of the truth in everything we say. No Christian is a “Doctor Know-It-All.”

Whoever assumes to have found the “truth” in Jesus and that this is, above all, the truth about our relationship to God and how we find peace with God through grace, forgiveness, and redemption, and whoever invokes the written revelation of Judeo-Christian tradition, has to simultaneously take everything regarding content and demeanor into consideration which represents serious restraints on a conversation with someone who thinks differently. “Speaking the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15) belong together, also in dialog and in missionary witness. Gentleness is not only an inevitable consequence of the fact that Christians proclaim the God of love and should love our neighbor and want to love our neighbor. Rather, it is also a consequence of the knowledge that Christians are themselves just pardoned sinners and are not God.

2. Thesis: Mission efforts esteem human rights and do not desire to disregard the dignity of human beings but rather to honor and foster human dignity.

Christians always look at other people as images of God (Genesis: 1:26-27; 5:1), even if these individuals have other views of themselves. From the point of view of Christianity, human rights are not derived from whether one believes in God or is a Christian. Rather, human rights are derived from the fact that everyone is in equal measure created by God and is created according to his image. Indeed, everyone is created equal, whether man or woman. For that reason, all people should be treated without showing favoritism towards any person (Romans 2:11; James 2:9). There are religions which only grant their own adherents human rights. Christians, however, defend the human rights of their enemies – and pray for them and love them (Matthew 5:44-Luke 6:27).

3. It is reprehensible to bring about conversions through the use of coercion, deceitfulness, trickery, or bribery, not to mention that by definition the result of such cannot be a true conversion and turning towards God from the depths of one’s heart in belief and trust.

A conversion is a deeply personal stirring of an individual’s heart towards God which is thought through to the end. When people say to us that they want to convert, we always have to grant them room and time to decide, refrain from badgering them, and should not hastily baptize them. Instead, we should be sure that they truly know what they are doing and want it from a position of conviction and belief.

Honesty and transparency should also hold sway as far as what the Christian faith is and what is expected of Christians after their conversion. Christianity is not a secret circle. Rather, it is open for the general public and seeks to be transparent for everyone. Christians have nothing to hide (Matthew 10:26-27) or to conceal beforehand only to reveal later on. Jesus said to those who wanted
to become his followers: “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?” (Luke 14:28; see also verses 27-33). Christians have to help people count the cost and not prematurely plug them into Christian churches, only to see people later notice that they were misled.

4. Thesis: One has to differentiate between advocating the human rights and religious freedom of adherents of other religions or of individuals without any religious affiliation and endorsing their claims to truth.

Strictly speaking, it is possible to advocate liberty, religious freedom, and freedom of conscience for others without holding their convictions to be true or sharing those convictions. Conversely, it is also derived from this that when agreement in questions of truth is lacking, one never has the right to oppress another individual.

Christians who proclaim the message might regret with bleeding hearts that other people reject the offer of redemption in Christ, but they never have the right to declare these people to be less than human, to attack them with words, to stir up the state powers to hatred against them, to entreat judgment against them, or to carry out such judgment.

Historical experience teaches the opposite: To share the same truth or to largely agree on questions relating to religion does not on its own prevent wars of religion against each other. Many large wars of religion have occurred within religions, and Christianity is not an exception.

5. Thesis: Religious freedom applies to all people, not just to Christians.

This is not only a political demand made upon Christians. Rather, it arises from the Christian faith itself. As already stated, God has created all people in his image (Genesis 1:26-27; 5:1), not only Christians. God desires – as mentioned in the Old Testament again and again – to be loved with all one’s heart and not out of coercion. Accordingly, the most inner orientation of an individual’s conscience and heart cannot be forced.

God has forbidden us to carry out any type of sentence on our critics and to punish people for their “unbelief.” Jonah also experienced that God was more merciful towards “godless” Nineveh than Jonah himself, who would have preferred to have seen judgment upon Nineveh (Jonah 4:1-10). And Jesus clearly rejected the thinking of his disciples to have fire sent down from heaven upon villages which spurned him (Luke 9:51-56). With that said, Christians are for all time forbidden from punishing other people for rejecting Jesus or the gospel (never mind their own convictions).

6. Thesis: Since the state does not belong to any religion and is not to proclaim the gospel but rather desires what is good and just for all people, and because God has granted human dignity to all people, since he has created everyone, (Genesis 1: 26-27; 5:1), Christians work together with the adherents of all religions and worldviews for the good of society – as far as religions allow it and reciprocate.

This directly applies to maintaining religious freedom, to all human rights, and it basically applies to peace and justice. Christians will always be involved with adherents of other religions and worldviews in the establishment of a state by being jointly active. In Romans 13:1-7, Paul does not presuppose that the “authorities” are only comprised of Christians. On the contrary, he puts Christians under the state, which is obligated to maintain justice, regardless of which religion or worldview its representatives have.

Paul admonishes Christians: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18), whereby he follows Jesus, who said: “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9) and “When you enter a house, first say, ‘Peace to this house’” (Luke 10:5). James, the brother of Jesus, is very reminiscent of his brother’s words when he says: “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness” (James 3:18). In 1 Timothy 2:1-2, Paul expands this command to encompass the world of politics: “. . . that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.”
Christians build up relationships of trust and love to all people, religious and non-religious, and this is the precondition for a peaceful and functioning coexistence. Tension and conflict between people can only be resolved if they speak with each other.

7. Thesis: The state is to protect religious freedom and is not to spread our religion.

Whoever looks at which tasks the New Testament ascribes to the state sees that the propagation and promotion of a certain religion do not belong among them but peace and justice for everyone do. Christians are subject to the state in issues of worldly justice. Indeed, Paul is able to describe the non-Christian state as nothing less than “God’s servant” when it punishes Christians who do wrong (Romans 13:1-7). That throughout history Christians have often handled this completely differently in so-called “Christian” countries changes nothing about the fact that a Christian should not have to bend his faith when he advocates religious freedom. Rather, this arises organically from his faith.

According to the Biblical understanding, the monopoly on force is something which only the state has. It has neither the task of proclaiming the gospel nor of enlarging the Christian church and is to keep itself out of questions of conscience and religion (in Romans 13:1-7 is a always a matter of “doing evil” and not of thinking evil), for which reason it as “God’s servant” expressly has to punish Christians who do wrong (Romans 13:1-7).

The state has to protect Christians only insofar as it should protect everyone who does what is good. And it only has to limit or punish Christians insofar as its service for justice and peace impedes and has to punish everyone who plans violence or exercises violence, regardless of whether and how they are religiously motivated or not. Christians thus demand for themselves no greater right to religious freedom than others. And they want to “live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18), not only with those who are like them.

8. Thesis: Religious freedom includes religious freedom for one’s own children.

As bitter as the experience might be when the children of committed Christians do not make or initially do not make the Christian faith the center of their lives, and as much as it is a matter of course that raising a child in the Bible is raising a child up in love to God and towards one’s neighbors (Deuteronomy 5:6-9), raising a child also means to bring the child into adulthood where he or she becomes independent (2 Timothy 3:17; Ephesians 4:11-16). This includes issues of one’s faith (2 Timothy 3:14-17; Deuteronomy 31:12-13). Every form of coercion exercised upon the next generation so that they do not leave “the church” is unbiblical, whether it emanates from the parents, the environment, the church, or the state. Belief in God cannot be forced. Rather, it is the most profound and most personal decision and attitude of the heart of the individual who turns in love toward the creator and redeemer who loves him.

The Baptists at the time of the Reformation and the later Baptist-oriented free churches expressed this directly. They rejected infant baptism and only accepted the baptism of people who demonstrated religious maturity, just as in the same way the voluntary nature of faith and of church membership was and is central for them. The necessity of an independent decision on the part of the next generation can be clearly maintained with infant baptism in another way, for instance through what was invented by Martin Bucer, confirmation. As much as Christians wish to raise their children to turn to Christ by example and by convincing discussion and teaching, what is central is one’s own personal thinking through the issue and making a decision based on an individual’s own faith (“conversion”); that also applies for one’s own children. That does not abolish the necessity of consciously Christian childrearing.