SORAPS Study of religions against prejudices and stereotypes

Religious Traditions & Promotion of Human Rights

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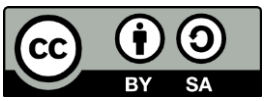

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Version No.	Author, institution	Date/Last Update
1	*Tim Jensen, University of Southern Denmark*	*December 3rd 2018*
2	*Mette Nøddeskou, University of Southern Denmark*	*December 11th 2018*

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS & PROMOTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

RELIGIONS AND RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS: OBSTACLES TO HUMAN RIGHTS OR PARTNERS IN PROMOTING HUMAN RIGHTS?

Danish human rights scholar and historian Eva Marie Lassen writes about the role of religion in the early and later history of the Universal Declaration and the UN human rights history:

"The establishment and initial development of international human rights law largely took place independently from religious traditions [...] In the 1980s and 1990s, UN institutions and other organisations concerned with human rights explored the possibility of involving religious traditions in the continuing implementation and development of the human rights concept. The reasons are obvious: first, in the process of implementing human rights in countries where state and religion are closely interlinked, it is, to various degrees, necessary to embrace religious traditions. Second – and regardless of the exact link between state and religion in a particular country – religious institutions may, as part of civil society, communicate human rights to local communities" (Lassen 2005, 84-85).

She continues (*ibid*, 85):

"In the same period, a particular construction of the history of human rights came to play an important role in the efforts both to let human rights take root in specific cultural traditions and to find common grounds between different cultures in the area of human rights. In 1948, the international community to some degree promoted the idea of a collective ownership of human rights based on culturally rooted links between different cultures and human rights. But at this point, the prevailing construction of the history of human rights was that of a history with predominantly Western roots. In the 1980s and 1990s, the UN, other human rights institutions, and an increasing number of scholars endorsed the view that the core principles of human rights, as expressed in The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other human rights documents, are closely linked to and profoundly inspired by the world's different cultural and religious traditions. In the construction of a human rights history which accompanied this view, all religious traditions were seen as a fountain of inspiration, both with regard to the past history of human rights and with regard to the making of the human rights history yet to come."

Lassen, however, adds that neutral observers of religion and human rights, of course know very well that it is much more complicated than this. The relation between human rights and religions, or even between some of the values later to be enshrined in human rights and religions, past as well as present, is far from unproblematic and even further from being just positive.

Lassen, thus, in yet another contribution (Lassen 2006, 619) to the discussion about religion and human rights, past and present, writes that the relationship "between human rights and religion has been a subject of continuous wonder, strong and often opposing views, heated debates, and sometimes confusion", and she thus echoes the scholar of religion Rosalind Hackett (Hackett 2005) who, with reference to other scholars, describes the relationship between religion and human rights as 'complex', 'uneasy', and 'vexed'.

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However, as Lassen (2006, 619) continues, then most people, politicians, human rights promoters and scholars, politicians et al. have increasingly admitted that "religion is important to human rights and that religion is an indispensable partner which has to be courted if universal human rights are to experience worldwide implementation."

This has also led to an increasing amount of literature on religion and human rights, be it possible historical forerunners to (some) human rights in the various religious traditions (or the opposite), the historical and present relationship between human rights and the religious traditions, be it in their classical texts or in the present various settings of the religions around the globe, or be it actual engagement or opposition to human rights and the promotion of human rights by certain religious leaders or groups (cf. Hackett 2005, 7 ff).

While some mainly tend to stress findings in texts and traditions that speak in favor of positive links between the various religions, others tend to stress the texts or passages or practices within past and present religious traditions that might be interpreted as in conflict or opposition to modern human rights.

This goes for a religion like Islam, often particularly targeted for being neither in its texts or in its present shapes in countries around the world in line with human rights standards, but scholars have, of course, also argued with reference to both classical and later texts, past and present, that Christianity, contrary to what is claimed by others, cannot pride itself of being different. It might well be that some seeds - that might later, under specific circumstances, pave the way for promotion of human rights - can be found in e.g. some early Christian texts but the same can be said about texts from other religions, too.

At the same time, with Christianity, as with Islam and e.g. Buddhism, history shows that human rights and democracy and e.g. gender equality is something that came into being in opposition to the religious regime and looking around the world today one can find Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus etc. who act in ways that violate human rights. But one can, of course, also find human rights supporters and 'fighters' among religious leaders and lay people of all religions.

Nevertheless, it is, as Lassen writes (2006, 619),

"[e]vident [...] that religious institutions as part of civil society (for instance local churches) may be used as a tool to carry human rights into local communities. In this way, religious institutions can potentially be powerful allies of human rights. If, on the other hand, these institutions declare themselves enemies or merely neutral observers of human rights, this can, at least in some countries, have dire consequences for the implementation of human rights. Equally, it is clear that in countries, where religion and state law are intertwined, human rights have to find religious acceptance in order to be successfully implemented."

Therefore, it can come as no surprise, that the the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in 2017 launched a so-called "Faith for Rights" framework said to " provide[s] space for a cross-disciplinary reflection on the deep, and mutually enriching, connections between religions and human rights. The objective is to foster the development of peaceful societies, which uphold human

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dignity and equality for all and where diversity is not just tolerated but fully respected and celebrated."
The initiative was introduced during a meeting in Beirut, and a Beirut Declaration was issued, and a video (see the website) with a speech by the High Commissioner was produced and uploaded. On the website one reads:

The Beirut Declaration considers that all believers – whether theistic, non-theistic, atheistic or other – should join hands and hearts in articulating ways in which "Faith" can stand up for "Rights" more effectively so that both enhance each other. Individual and communal expression of religions or beliefs thrive and flourish in environments where human rights are protected. Similarly, human rights can benefit from deeply rooted ethical and spiritual foundations provided by religions or beliefs.

Rather than focusing on theological and doctrinal divides, the Beirut Declaration favours the identification of common ground among all religions and beliefs to uphold the dignity and equal worth of all human beings. The Beirut Declaration reaches out to persons belonging to religions and beliefs in all regions of the world, with a view to enhancing cohesive, peaceful and respectful societies on the basis of a common action-oriented platform which is open to all actors that share its objectives.

One can, of course find other similar initiatives, and one from some years ago was characteristic in its way of stressing that from a religious point of view man(kind) does not have rights but 'plights', i.e. stressing that humans are 'created' by some divine superhuman power, and that the important thing is that humans have the obligation to follow the moral rules laid down by these superhuman powers and by the sacred texts and founders of the religion in question. A bit similar to this is a viewpoint that - as is the case with some protestants in Denmark - insists that human rights have put humans before God (have made humans, divine), and that human rights thus are in direct conflict with the core of Protestant Christianity.

Also within the various religions one can find specific human rights initiatives (similar to e.g. initiatives to help save the planet in its current ecological or climate crisis), and mention may be made also of the efforts by e.g. the Islamic Organisation of Cooperation (OIC), formerly the Islamic Conference Organisation, an organisation that has launched its own pro-human rights program. Though much debated and criticised, it bears witness to the power of international human rights, and the need for religions to relate to human rights. The OIC, of course, also celebrated the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration in 2018.

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