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Christian Ethics and Human Rights

Abstract

In the present study, we wish to highlight the fact that only in a redeeming relation with God can we talk about human rights. The person remains what he or she is only when he or she centers him/herself and settles him/herself in God. From our perspective, we will analyze the relations between human rights and Christian ethics. What common or discordant viewpoints exist between the two and whether they are compatible or irreconcilable?



Keywords

Christian Ethics, Human Rights, Freedom, Responsibility, God.

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1 Introduction

Due to the fact that man's fundamental rights and freedoms were emitted for the first time in a form close to the one we know today during the French Revolution (considered to be an anticlerical and anti-ecclesial movement), many theologians or just Christians shy away from discussing about them or integrating them in a moral discourse.

If we consider the divine Revelation, we shall notice that man, even since his creation, is endowed with rights and has numerous responsibilities.

And if ontologically we can consider that the origin of the human rights is the divine will, the first practical attempts of applying them can be found even since the first written legislative code: *Code of Hammurabi*, in Babylon (Iraq, 2000 B.C.) or *Cyrus Charter* (Iran, 570 B.C.), initiated by the *Persian King* or the English *Magna Carta* and *Declaration of Rights* (1215), elaborated by the English noblemen and clergy members against the abuses of power of King *John I*.

During the modern epoch, discussions about man's fundamental rights and freedoms emerged after the Second World War, when, having enough of so much violence and disregard for man's dignity, in particular by the Nazi regime and after the great Nurnberg Trial (1945-1946), people of all the nations decided, in the year 1948 at New York in the meeting of the U.N. General Assembly, to adopt the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

The objective of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, elaborated by the U.N. General Assembly on 10 September 1948, is to encourage the respect for man's rights and freedoms. It promotes man's personal, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

Among the rights enumerated in this Declaration, we shall remind of: the right to life, to liberty, to security, to a correct trial, to intimacy, to think freely, to express oneself freely, the right to an opinion of one's own, and the right to choose a religion, the right education. Out of its 30 articles, only Article 18 refers to religion: "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."

Human rights are a subject that aroused the interest of the law theorists and practitioners, philosophers and theologians, similarly of the secular and of the religious man.

Legally speaking, individual rights are prerogatives entitling their owner to have a certain conduct or to ask from the others for a certain conduct, turning, in case of necessity, to the State's coercive power.

According to their degree of opposability, individual rights are absolute and relative. Human rights have an absolute character. The absolute right is that individual right that its titular executes without turning to another person.

According to Joel Feinberg, human rights are precious and indispensable possessions:

"A world without them, however benevolent and preoccupied by accomplishing its own responsibilities, would suffer from a great moral poverty. People would no longer hope for a decent treatment from others based on merits and legitimate expectations. Moreover, they would get to believe that they have no right to expect goodness and respect from others, so that, when they benefit even from a minimum decent treatment, they will consider themselves rather lucky than inherently entitled to that treatment, and

their benefactors will be considered as particularly virtuous and worthy of gratitude. On the other hand, rights are not just gifts or favors motivated by love or by mercy, for which gratitude is the only adequate answer... A world with rights that can be claimed any time is a world where all the people (...) are objects worthy of respect, both in their eyes and in other people's eyes.”¹

The author of the document of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, René Cassin, founder of the International Institute for Human Rights of Strasbourg, winner of the Nobel Prize for Peace, affirms that the ideological origin of the *Declaration* can be found in the ten commandments.

This declaration wants to be a minimum guarantee for respect of the human dignity in the world, beyond the social, political or religious organization, a true barrier in the way of evil.

Closely related to our subject is the problem of human liberty. Being a created being, man also has a “*borrowed existence*”. The created are not free by their nature because they are not the origin of their existence. Having a given existence, this means that also freedom is given to the human being.

To gain his freedom, man gets close to God, and he obeys His will. Obeying God is similar to consenting to freedom.² Man's freedom is attained by his participation to the Divine freedom, the needed condition for this partaking of the Divine freedom being our communion with God, materialized in the respect of His commandments. God is hidden in His commandments. Being free is in accordance to human nature. Genuine freedom

¹ Joel Feinberg, *Duties, Right and Claims*, American Philosophical Quarterly 3: 2, 1966, p. 8.

² Georgios Mantzaridis, *Morala creștină*, (București: Editura Bizantină, 2006), p. 209.

does not mean only the freedom to choose, but also freedom (liberation) from sin.

A man who sins is not free anymore. Sin makes man a slave and determines his fall from his genuine state. Only to the extent to which man refrains himself and conforms himself to God's will, he conquers his sinful passions and wins his spiritual freedom.³ To fight against one's sinful passions means to fight for freedom. Our freedom stops where the others' freedom begins. A man who sins does not love himself, and thus he cannot accomplish the divine commandment of loving his neighbor as he loves himself. The perfection of freedom consists in the perfection of love. Only the man who loves is free to do what he wants, in this sense one can be better understood Saint Augustine's advice: "*ama et fac quod quis*" (love and do what you want).

God's commandments are commandments of liberty. The Christian must not only know the commandments but must also apply them in his life, in this way, they become redeeming. The commandments are not simple moral (ethical) norms, but divine works or energies.⁴ In each commandment we find God, this is why their realization is the meeting and the communion with Him.

Only in liberty man situates himself properly in the relation with himself, with God and with his neighbor. From this perspective, human rights cannot be divided or separated from God's privileges (rights). Only when they are bonded with the Divine rights, human rights are accomplished, making man responsible in front of Him.

Professor Mantzaridis deeply notices this aspect: "God's rights, which also imply the observance of His commandments, bring

³ *Ibidem*, p. 213.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 173.

with them the application of justice in peoples' daily life. When all these rights are respected, then the human rights will be observed, too. The respect for man is based on his character of a being 'in God's image.' Moreover, his real value can be found by reference to his archetype. This becomes possible in Jesus Christ, in Whom any corporeal discrimination and any arrogance is annihilated."⁵

Human rights, as they are understood today, no matter if we refer to the first Article of the French Declaration of "*man's and citizen's rights*", or the first article of the World Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations Organization, which state that "*men are born and remain free and equal in rights*", are tributary to a secularized meaning, where God is something that is to be put in reserve.

Unfortunately, today, under the mask of the syntagm "*human rights*" there are attempts to substantiate a series of things and practices that are in contradiction with the moral order put by God in His creation. Therefore, for the secularized world we are living in, abortion, homosexuality, euthanasia, eugenics, various practices of the genetic engineering, prostitution and so on, can easily be supported by referring to "*human rights*".

In this study, we want to highlight that only in a redemptive relationship with God can we talk about the so-called human rights, man remaining what he is only when he is centered and settles himself in God.

From our point of view, we will analyze the relations between human freedoms and Christian ethics, the common or discordant points of view, and whether they are perfectly compatible or irreconcilable.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 272.

2 Christian ethics' perspective on the human rights

The question that arises is whether Christian ethics acknowledges the existence of some fundamental human rights and freedoms. Definitely yes, because these are part of what the Christian theology names God's image, in other words, the defining and unique divine mark of the Creator, which exists in man. Moreover, if God is love, justice, freedom, kindness, fidelity and so on, then man, as his Creator's image, has, *en gardant les proportions* (*keeping the proportions*) these features, too.

This is the reason why, from the Christian point of view, it is not only possible to talk about these rights, it is even necessary to do it. We should also not forget that the environment of the emergence of these freedoms, is a European one, namely the France of the 18th century, which, even though it was against the clergy, was still impregnated with the Christian spirit, something of it remaining imperishably alive in that mentality. Moreover, as P. Evdochimov stated, only Christianity was the proper territory for the emergence even of atheism, because in the spaces it impregnated, it allowed freedom and justice, too.⁶

We should note that no liberty or right from the Fundamental Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms is anti-human or anti-Christian, so that, from the Christian ethics perspective, there is no problem to integrate them in its value system. They are rather, from a certain point of view, more or less a socio-political application of the Gospel.

The fundamental objections refer rather to superficial issues, for instance, that it is rather the leftist movements (socialist, communist and atheist) that are promoting these rights, but

⁶ See P. Evdochimov, *Vârstele vieții spirituale*, (București: Christiana, 1993), p. 17.

what is forgotten is the fact that these very movements are precisely the ones that massively violated these rights, and the big Western democratic countries defending these rights belong to the Euro-Atlantic Christian area (although the secularization level is evident).

Being created in God's image and in order to attain the eternal likeness with Him, man is considered the crown of the Creation, the manager of the Creation (Ps. 8: 1; Hes. 28: 12, 14) or a genuine mediator between the material and the spiritual world, and a co-continuator of the Creation with God⁷. From the perspective of their importance, we could say that man's very first right and also his first responsibility is to enter in a free dialogue with his Creator.⁸

There is also a classification of these rights, which has its origin in the Middle Ages and refers to:

2.1 Rights and freedoms deriving from man's ontological status

Because the majority of the theologians consider that God's image in man refers to reason, will and feeling, these are classified in their turn as follows:

- *rights and freedoms of reason*, which refer mainly to the right of rationally know and organize the Creation,
- *rights and freedoms of the will*, which refer to man's capacity to choose by himself the path of his existence,
- *Rights and freedoms of feeling or love, which manifest themselves related to himself, God and his neighbor*

⁷ N. Berdiaev, *Sensul creației*, (Bucuresti: Humanitas, 1992), p. 87.

⁸ J. Meyendorff, *Teologia bizantină. Tendințe istorice și teme doctrinare*, (Bucuresti: E.I.B.M.B.O.R., 1996), p. 185.

2.2 Rights and freedoms derived from the social organization

These rights and freedoms have less or not at all a revealed character and are sometimes exclusively human rights.

Returning, however, to the relation between man's fundamental rights and Christian ethics, we should note that Christian ethics acknowledges the necessity of the existence of these fundamental human rights and freedoms, whose main goal is the observance of man's dignity and the safeguarding of the world peace.

Insisting on the fact that man is a special creation of God, the Christian ethics believes that to respect man's dignity finally means to comply with the Creator's dignity, and, the other way round, not honoring man, we dishonor his Creator. Also, man's historical experience has demonstrated that when man is despised, sooner or later the result is war and crime against man and also impiety about God.

The fundamental principle that lays at the basis of man's fundamental rights and freedoms is the promotion of human life, which should not be limited by slavery, inequity, injustice or humiliation. This is the reason why we cannot find any discrepancy between these rights and the fundamental principles of the Christian ethics, and the analysis of these rights and freedoms through the prism of the Christian ethics fully testifies about their humanism (in a Christian sense). At the same time, at the foundation of the human rights are also values like human dignity, equality, freedom and interpersonal existence.⁹

Concerning man's liberty and equality in rights and dignity, and also the fraternity based on reason and conscience, we can affirm that these have a profound biblical fundament. The

⁹ Cf. P. Nellas, *Omul, animal îndumnezeit*, (Sibiu: Deisis, 1994), p. 9.

biblical idea of liberty means: “the happy state of having been freed from slavery for a life of joy and satisfaction that was not possible previously.”¹⁰ Therefore it has a profoundly spiritualized, internalized character.

Moreover, is there someone who does not know that the fundamental postulate of Christian ethics affirms that man’s liberty and his rights (as a creation of God) appear and draw their force only from the relation with God because only in God man is truly a man?¹¹ The more man gets close to God - the source of justice and freedom, the more he gets close to his neighbor and fairly appreciates him. When you are in a vivid and dynamic relation with God, you can no longer do injustice to your neighbor.

Yet, liberty is also linked in the Christian ethics system to the big concepts of: good and truth (from here comes that idea of *kalocagathia* that expresses especially the good and the beautiful in a relation) and is especially linked with gnology, because without knowledge there is no relationship (with God or the neighbor) and no virtue. This is why P. Evdochimov, a well-known Orthodox theologian, but perfectly integrated in the Western European cultural paradigm, will state: “Liberty has to do with the spirit, with the person. When the spirit or the person is lifted (elevated), at the end of the road he does not wish for anything else but good and truth”.¹²

¹⁰ J. C. Douglas, *Dictionar Biblic*, (Oradea: Cartea Creștină, 1995), p. 754.

¹¹ Cf. I. Zizioulas, *Ființa eclezială*, (București: Editura Bizantină, 1997), p. 46; Ch. Yannaras, *Abecedar al credinței. Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, (București: Editura Bizantină, 1996), p. 71; D. Stăniloae, “Natură și har în teologia bizantină”, *Ortodoxia* nr. 3/1974, pp. 393-394.

¹² P. Evdochimov, *Femeia și mântuirea lumii*, (București: Editura Christiana, 1995), p. 54.

We believe that here it should also be mentioned that the Embodiment of God's Son maximizes the human liberty (the maximum of human liberty leads to deification if we use liberty correctly) and shows the great appreciation of God-the-Creator for man.

Therefore, to say that: "*God alone is man's liberty*"¹³, represents actually to give a component, to give a divine vertical (line) to human rights. Only in, with and through the embodied Son of God, Jesus Christ, can we affirm that our liberty can be complete. Through Him, the *Great Liberator*, man can be free from the constraints of the universe, from his limitations and death. After Christ liberty is called *resurrection*. In this last devastating century of man's ideologies and insanities, it has become more evident than ever that the person and freedom, just as the defense of man's fundamental rights and freedoms are the great (re)discoveries and values of mankind. From the Christian point of view, man's capacity to be a subject of the liberty or of law is given by man's quality of being a person, namely to have openness towards the other, the openness of a social being.¹⁴

For the Christian ethics, man's fundamental rights and freedoms have an internalized spiritual component and an external social one. The internalized component starts from the fact that the more man moves forward on the path of virtue, internal edification and closeness to God, the more he will respect his rights and freedoms and also his neighbor's. Therefore, between inner peace or disharmony and respect or

¹³ O. Clement, *Adevar si libertate. Ortodoxia in contemporaneitate*", (Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 1997), p. 105.

¹⁴ Ch. Yannaras, *Abecedar al credinței. Introducere în teologia ortodoxă*, p. 84; Cf. V. Lossky, *Teologia mistică*, (București: Anastasia, 1993), pp. 148-149.

disrespect of our neighbor's rights and freedoms, there is a strong relation of direct proportionality.

The Christian spiritual authors and the Orthodox ethic theology insist on the internal purification and on the fight against the sinful passions as an essential fundament for respecting man's rights and freedoms. It is essential to respect yourself, to accomplish the creation's goal, to fight against the slavery of sin, because if you do not comply the rights with which the Creator has endowed you, if you do not protect your freedom, you will not be able to respect your neighbor's fundamental rights and freedoms, either.

A superior development of this line of reasoning can be found in the first Epistle of Saint John the Apostle when he refers to the love for God and the love for our fellow. Between love and human rights, there is a vigorous and powerful relation, because love and man's rights have as a fundament the idea of respect, an idea that the Church has been promoting in all the epochs and areas.¹⁵

We also should take into account the following aspect: a vicious man who is a slave to sins can hardly respect his neighbor's rights and freedoms because sin prompts him to sin. Only following the path of faultlessness assigned by the Creator as a development program for man, which supposes freedom from sin, can man appreciate his dignity and his neighbor's dignity, too.

Regarding the model to be followed in respecting man's rights and freedoms, this is for sure God, because, who respects man more equitably and better than Him? And who is the power-

¹⁵ Cf. I. I. Ică jr, "Biserică, societate și gândire în Răsărit, în Occident și în Europa de azi", in the volume *Gândirea socială a Bisericii. Fundamente – documente – analize – perspective*, (Sibiu: Editura Deisis, 2002), p. 45.

giver regarding the human freedom and man's Redeemer if not God!

Of course, there are voices in the Orthodox theology, and not only there, denying any Christian fundament for man's fundamental rights and freedoms¹⁶, insisting rather on the existence of the human responsibilities, yet forgetting the theological, logical, philosophical, and jurisdictional reality: any right corresponds to a responsibility, respectively what for me is a responsibility, for my neighbor is a right and the other way around. Alternatively, better said, the right and the responsibility are two facets of the same reality.

The Decalogue itself contains, in its prescriptions, rights and responsibilities, without which people's social coexistence would be impossible, similarly, the natural Moral Law contains minimal prescriptions that make possible the life of people in society. Human rights are attributes of God's image in man, and this is why we can tell they are in a way divine rights. If we refer to human liberty, we can say that its preservation is an essential part of man's effort towards completeness, preserving your freedom means advancing on the road to holiness, this being the core work of the ascetic effort.

Despite the theoretical clarity of these realities, one can observe, however, in the daily life, that even though man's rights are considered universal, and men are born equal in rights and freedoms, not all of them have the possibility to exert these rights and to for them to be respected, this is why there are still in the world enough inequalities offending man and his Creator. It is important to keep in mind that human rights, even though they are prescriptions formulated and perfected by human political institutions, have a powerful revealed basis and

¹⁶ Cf. C. Coman, *Biblia în Biserică*, (București: Editura Bizantină, 1997), p. 34.

do not enter in contradiction with the divine Revelation or with the religious sense of man's life.

Because man is meant for an existence according to the Trinitarian model (the communion of love) with God and his fellows, to observe one's neighbor's rights and to promote his freedom is a genuine humanist act in its Christian sense, a perfecting act.¹⁷

3 Conclusions

As we have seen above, man's fundamental rights and liberties represent human formulations that have their fundament in the antiquity, but which were elaborated the way we know them today in the modern times, which have as a goal the preservation of human dignity, regardless of the religious, economic, social, and government system.

The Christian ethics acknowledges the revealed fundament of these rights and situates their origin in Creator's will and the divine image existing in man. As a model of respecter of man's dignity and the human rights and liberties, the Church presents God-the-Creator Himself, man's Savior and Accomplisher.

There are, however, voices in the Christian theology that deny the revealed character of these rights insisting on the fact that the Biblical ethics refers only to responsibilities towards our neighbor, not to personal rights.

These opinions do not take into account, nevertheless, the intrinsic dignity of man, his quality of exceptional creation of God and the great honor with which God blessed man: the Embodiment of God's Son. Moreover, how could man honor his

¹⁷ Cf. I. Zizioulas, *op.cit.*, p. 45; D. Stăniloae, *Teologia dogmatică ortodoxă*, vol. 1, (Bucuresti: E.I.B.M.B.O.R., 1978), p. 401.

neighbor, when he does not honor himself when he is not aware of his dignity? Only by respecting his rights, will he respect (as responsibilities) his neighbor's.

Essential is that anything man does, he ought to take into account the principle of love, to take action in the interpersonal relations only and only driven by love and to judge and appreciate everything only through the prism of love. Here is the powerful bond between human rights and Christian ethics, these being, in fact, practical applications of love, projections on the political and social level of the Gospel of salvation.

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