

NEW HUMANISM: DIFFERENCE AND DIALOGUE

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Consider what is currently happening in Syria through the lens of human rights and we begin to see that we have put far too much faith in human rights to deliver human beings to a recognition of solidarity and mutual responsibility that would form of the basis of an 'ethical commonwealth' (Kant). The problem is this – and the case of what is happening in Syria emphasises it – discourse about human rights emerged in a highly specific cultural context: western Europe under the sway of Enlightenment ideology. It was a context which centred upon the education and moral development of the Cartesian individual. This individual is then vested, albeit negatively, with the right to be free from interference by third parties insofar as he or she does not himself or herself interfere with the freedoms of those same third-parties. Tolerance is the *sine qua non* of such freedom. So, slowly, there emerged the right to freedom of expression, the right to privacy, the right to equality before the law, and the right to be free from public prejudices on the grounds of race, religion, sexual orientation, gender and ethnicity. The law, and sometimes the constitution, guaranteed such rights and the judiciary pursued the violation of such rights. Now, laying aside for a moment the very optimistic anthropology that underpins such a social contract (where 'contract' is only a metaphor for 'obligation' since no one signs anything and the conditions for sociality are not formalised), the problem here lies in what might be termed the myth of the social atom. The individual is viewed as his or her own property – and the language of rights owes much to the development of property law that took place at the same time (see Locke). But this view is profoundly mistaken: we only belong to ourselves insofar as we also belong to other people. Or, put another way, our individual bodies are mapped onto any number of other corporations to which we belong, in which we participate, towards which we contribute, and through which we relate. It is not simply, as the philosopher Martin Buber articulated it, there is no I without a You. Not is it simply, as the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas articulated it, there is no I without a You and a They. We are caught up and engrafted within a series of interconnected networks that constitute our complex livelihoods and the various corporations in which they are involved. I live in a city called Salford; I work at the University of Manchester; I'm a priest in the Church of England. If we just stop there for a moment, then saying nothing of my being part of the body of my extensive and extending family and the body of my friends, I as an individual am mapped on to a civic body (Salford corporation) and institutional body (the University) and an ecclesial body (the Church of England). And these bodies form part of even larger national and international bodies. I am also an Englishman – which means I also belong to, participate in, contribute to the British economy, British politics, British education, as one of the four nationalities which make up the United Kingdom. This is what I mean by the Enlightenment myth of individual. Such an individual does not exist and never did exist. If my country goes to war, however much I may protest on the streets demonstrating 'Not in My Name', then such action will be in my name to the extent that this is the country where I live and to which I belong. I cannot opt out of belonging to, participating in, and contributing to other corporations. I can change the other bodies my own is mapped on to – like leaving the University to join become an business entrepreneur, or converting from

Anglican Christianity to Judaism, or selling my house in Salford and moving to Oxford; but my corporeality would still be mapped on to any number of other forms of corporation. My dependency upon others for my own livelihood is, practically, total. And several sciences are showing that: sociology, anthropology, neuroscience and cognitive science are all demonstrating that though we make a contribution to our environments those environments fashion us profoundly.

If then the individual is a myth, if we do not own ourselves like we own other goods like an apartment or a diamond ring, then what happens to human rights? First of all, such rights are limited. They are not non-existent – particularly where there are laws and even constitutions guaranteeing them. But they can only be actively pursued where they have been violated and I can prove their violation. And sometimes my rights conflict with the rights of other persons: as Salman Rushdie discovered when he published *Satanic Verses*; as my right to privacy becomes increasingly compromised by advanced telecommunication networks; as my right to religious belief conflicts with, say, the laws of my country that favour stem-cell research and abortion up to so many weeks; and as the promotion and pursuit of these rights by one community (the UN) is at odds with the rights of national sovereignty by another community (Syria). And sometimes the prosecution of violations of these rights becomes bemired in legalities, the economics of policing, military force and the judiciary, and counter arguments that bring other prejudices to the surface. Secondly, human rights turn individual people into pieces of property and, in doing so, a liberal agenda moves closer to a Marxist understanding of commodification. People are not objects. One's religion, nationality, ethnicity, race, gender or sexual orientation are not so many predicates or attributes of an object – they are determining factors of selfhood and identity.

So, if it was the turn to humanism and what the Renaissance philosopher Pico della Mirandola termed the 'dignity of man' that gave rise to human rights, then we have rethink humanism and make it more profound. We need to invest the materiality of the multiple bodies I have drawn attention to, the multiple bodies of which we are an integral part, with values and significance that are not reducible to mere flesh. We have to give them metaphysical gravitas – and by 'metaphysical' there I mean, like Aristotle, that which is more than, after, or together with the physical. I do not mean something of a different order than the physical (as in some dualism between body and soul or body and mind). We have to see materiality, and particularly (but not in isolation) the materiality of bodies, differently. The theological perspective facilitates this.

A word, first, about the term 'theological'. By employing it I am deliberately avoiding the term 'religious', not only because what a religion is (and therefore what being religious is) is highly ambiguous and contentious, but, mainly, because the generic word 'religion' can only be used sparingly. Otherwise, it is just too abstract. We are treating here theological practices of piety, and the vision and the values they fashion within adherents. These are very far from being either abstract or generic; they are highly particular and contextual. Theological here is also not meant to be just a Christian concept. Many of the world's dominant practices of piety (Judaism, Islam, Confucianism, Hinduism in particular) have now begun to use the term theology in accounts of what

they believe and how those beliefs inform the practices of worship and the codes of moral conduct. So when I talk about the need for a theological account of being human that would root humanism in values, visions and practices that transcend and yet relate to the human condition then each practice of piety, each divinity we might say, will conceive that theological account of being human within the frameworks of their own tradition. These frameworks render being human sacred; and the understanding according to human beings as sacred is, I suggest, far more profound than any pseudo-contractual, highly contestable, forever being violated, very difficult to cash-in, rights. I could at this point turn to the specific theological humanism found in, say, the Judeo-Christian-Islamic conception of human being made in the image and likeness of God, with the responsibility in this world of incarnating the goodness and liberality of God, with judgement in the world to come and Paradise as their telos. But instead I will draw attention to a highly particular symbol of the divinity of being human found in several religions and that is the Tree of Life. Explored recently in films as different as James Cameron's *Avatar* and Terence Malick's *Tree of Life*, this symbol (found in Indic and Aztec iconography) is a complex expression of the sacred character of the life principle (in Hebrew *Nephesh*). It articulates a doctrine of creation and its goodness, life as a beneficent gift of what is divine and transcendent, and the indiscriminate bounty of grace towards us and all living creatures. It points to the fact that human beings are fragile dependences within eco-systems that are delicate and interconnected in complex ways; the destruction, abuse, manipulation or exploitation of any part of these eco-systems will impact upon all other parts. When these dependencies are respected then there is flourishing: not for one with respect to many, but for all. We need then to tread softly, with care and attention, with reverence for and courtesy towards the multiple webs of relation in and through which we exist – not because a human being has rights that, in some cases, can be negatively enforced, but because the vision behind these rights themselves is a theological one.

The liberation that human rights seeks can only be realised when the sacredness or divinity of life itself is central to them. Because so many religions share this understanding of life as a gift and a recognition that a single human being is situated in a system of dependencies, a network of relations both with other human beings and the whole created world, then across the specificities of cultural and religious difference dialogue becomes possible. It is not simply 'dialogue' as talk. Talk is often very cheap, and the ideal of people from different religions coming together to talk their way through to a mutual recognition of what they share is an abstraction from the everyday realities within which we are all caught and the other identities to which we are related that colour the way we appear before each other (ethnicities, gender differences, nationalities, class differences etc..). No, dialogue has to be multilayered and be understood in terms of praxes; ways of living together and alongside each other. The dialogues cannot be one-off, staged events. We need to build relations across differences so that the network of our dependencies is enlarged to embrace the diversity needed. This takes time and commitment, but once established can become transformative. I have seen it accomplished recently when my daughter, who is a Christian, met and then married a Muslim boy. The differences could be overcome but they also had to be faced. This is what genuine dialogue can achieve where there is time and commitment to listening to

the differences and listening far deeper to what is shared even in those differences: the very human desire for peace and flourishing that the gift of life might be nurtured, treasured, accepted as not our by right but by grace. The Jewish people have a Psalm which gets to the heart of what the religious perspective on human life espouses: “it is he who has made us, and not we ourselves: we are his people and the sheep of his pasture.”