

Recovering the Christian Foundations of Human Rights

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COMMENTARY



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Many progressives think that independence from religious belief is a crucial source of the power of human rights. According to many conservatives, the spurning of faith reflects a dangerous delusion inscribed in human rights doctrine. Amid the bad blood and casual vituperation that do daily damage to American politics, correcting the error common to the left and right that human rights are one thing and religion entirely another might contribute to rebuilding common ground.

Progressives link human rights to a secular and enlightened left-liberalism. This school of political ideas supposes that religion is naturally divisive and provincial. It also asserts that reason provides universal political principles and that a single set of rights and democratic institutions that suits all peoples in all times and places can be deduced from these universal principles.

Social conservatives often equate liberalism with the progressive definition and presume that human rights thinking bears its taint. The liberalism of human rights, conservative critics contend, assumes the falsity and harmfulness of religion; encourages intellectuals to devise grand schemes to re-engineer society in a progressive mold; and operates to subvert social cohesion and political stability by inciting contempt for local practices, traditional morality, and transcendent beliefs.

The founders of classical liberalism saw the connection between religion and liberty differently. Figures such as John Locke, James Madison, Edmund Burke, and Alexis de Tocqueville maintained that the protection of individual rights, the practice of toleration, and the institutions of limited government central to classical liberalism derived support from Christian faith, and that religion was most secure in a free society. They viewed faith and freedom not as mortal adversaries and not even as neutral noncombatants but rather as indispensable allies.

In “Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom,” Robert Louis Wilken provides a wealth of evidence drawn both from major events and seminal texts to show that the unfolding of Christian faith and the development in the West of the idea of individual freedom have been intimately intertwined.

This is not to deny the religious persecution across centuries perpetrated by Christianity. The enforcement of religious orthodoxy and the repression of dissent have been a default option throughout history. What distinguishes Christianity has been the steady and deepening appreciation that its core teachings require not merely toleration — in the sense of grudging or politically expedient acceptance of differences in religious belief and forms of worship — but rather robust freedom because by its very nature faith cannot be coerced. So powerful was this idea within Christianity and so profound has been Christianity’s influence in the West and around the world that it has furnished an “intellectual framework” that established freedom of religion as a basic assumption of liberal democracy and eventually as a fundamental human right.

Professor emeritus of the history of Christianity at the University of Virginia, Wilken argues that a commitment to religious freedom is sown into Christianity’s foundations. The opening chapters of the Hebrew Bible — for Christians, the Old Testament — teach that man was created in God’s image (Genesis 1:26-27), and that this brings openness to, and ultimately the ability to distinguish between, good and evil (Genesis 3:22). Wilken quotes Tertullian (A.D. 160-A.D. 220), who provided the outstanding defense of the freedom of early Christians within the Roman world to follow their faith: “Man was created by God as free, with power to choose and power to act. ... There is no clearer indication in him of God’s image and similitude than this, the outward expression of God’s own dignity.”

In language that anticipates Thomas Jefferson — and was admired by him 16 centuries later — Tertullian wrote, “It is only just and a privilege inherent in human nature that every person should be able to worship according to his own convictions. For one person’s religion neither harms nor hurts another.” Therefore, “[c]oercion has no place in religious devotion.”

Along with the moral dimension of religious freedom, Christianity proclaims a political dimension. Tertullian understood Jesus’s famous New Testament admonition to “[r]ender to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21) as establishing two authorities to which Christians are subject: the earthly king and God in heaven. When kings issue commands contrary to conscience — that is, “a form of spiritual knowledge that contains an obligation to act” — Christians are obliged to resist those commands.

The collapse of the Roman Empire and the spread of Christianity from the Mediterranean Basin throughout Europe gave birth to new challenges. Instead of Romans oppressing Christians, a politically powerful church and emperors who professed Christianity punished dissenting Christians and non-Christians, especially Jews, for deviating from the one true faith. Christendom — an extended society united by a single authoritative interpretation and institutionalization of Christianity — was marked by endless power struggles between the church and the kings, brutal wars, the Crusades, and the Inquisition. At the same time, medieval thinkers restated and gave philosophical heft to Christian ideas of man’s inherent dignity, the sanctity of conscience, and the division of power into an ecclesiastical authority and secular authority.

In the early 16th century, Martin Luther ushered in the Reformation. It unraveled the medieval synthesis and supplanted Christendom with a diversity of Christian sects — not just Catholic and Protestant but many variants on Protestantism’s rejection of church hierarchy and emphasis on the individual’s direct relation to Holy Scripture and to God. The unprecedented pluralism of the new confessional communities in 16th-century Europe threatened social cohesion and political stability by dividing empires, states, and even communities.

Like the medieval thinkers, the early-modern Christian reformers did not need to invent new ideas about freedom to reconcile Christianity with new social and political realities. “By knitting the certainties of the past to the tumultuous present,” Wilken argues, “they refashioned ancient ideas, which over the course of several generations were made to fit the new social and religious landscape.”

The appeal to conscience, understood as the voice of God within, along with the insistence that the civil authorities had no business dictating *inner* religious belief, left unanswered whether civil peace depended on a state-supported church and government enforcement of *external* practice of religious rites and ceremonies. By the late 16th century, Protestants in the

Netherlands answered forcefully that freedom of conscience is a natural right and that it includes the freedom of individuals to give public expression to the dictates of conscience in church services unhampered by government coercion.

A century or so later John Locke in his “Letter Concerning Toleration” — composed in the 1680s in the Netherlands, to which he had fled from England to escape political persecution — gave philosophical expression to the idea that government has no authority to establish or supervise “Articles of Faith, or Forms of Worship.”

As Wilken observes, “Locke’s thinking on the ends of government and of religion moves along a well-trodden path.” That path was blazed by Christianity and it runs through the United States Constitution and, almost 200 years later, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Grasping the old — and enduring — connection between human rights and Christianity could help curb excesses that these days damage both progressivism and conservatism.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at PeterBerkowitz.com and he can be followed on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter. He is also a member of the State Department’s Policy Planning Staff. The views expressed are his own and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States government.