

Human Rights and Christian Thought (Chrysostomos Hatzilambrou)

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The

emphasis given by Orthodox theology to the creation of people as images of the Image of God, is directly related to the Orthodox understanding of the concept of rights. As creations of God (*Matth.* 19, 14; *Acts* 17, 28), people have been made with the potential to resemble our Creator and to share features of His mode of existence. We act with other people in a free social relationship of love, without the necessity for legal constraints, social conventions, limitations and boundaries. These are parameters which are set in order to limit the chances of rights being infringed.

For the Christian, God isn't considered to be merely the Creator, but the Father of all of us; therefore all people are siblings to each other. The whole of humankind is

a single, undivided unit with the Triune God as the centre of its existence. So we are called upon to progress from mere biological coexistence with those who are different to a genuine community of persons and to the acceptance of alterity and difference. We are to live in harmony with the whole of creation, in a communion of love, in accordance with the model of the Creator, so that there's no need to enshrine individual rights, which will flourish as the result of freedom and selfless love, as in the model of the Holy Trinity.

The main problem in our own time as regards the acceptance of and respect for human rights lies in the rise of nationalism and the impressive ability of various governments and governmental coalitions throughout the world to defend themselves and, with every available means of repression and incredible violence, to protect their political and economic interests at the expense of human freedom and dignity. Human rights are founded on the conviction that human dignity equates to human freedom and not to our cultural creativity. They don't draw their identity from cultural traditions but from the whole of human civilization.

The incorporation of human rights into international law means that the state is no longer the sole guarantor of rights, though the *commercialization of culture* and the involvement of economic and political interests do not prevent their infringement. For Orthodox theology, the search for and establishment of human rights does not lie in natural law not in the proper functioning of society, but in another central basis, the ontological existence of the person, in a sanctifying community of persons, with the criteria of freedom and selfless love for other people, beyond self-centredness and selfishness. Although it doesn't deny natural law, as Protestantism does, nor the social institutions that derive from it, it doesn't absolutize it as the Church of Rome does, but places it below the renovation of the world 'in Christ'.

Human rights don't have to do with abstract principles or formal ordinances, but with people and their dignity. They aren't static formulations or expressions but a dynamic reality that evolves as injustice shifts its guises world-wide. The very first article of the Declaration of Human Rights confirms the value of freedom and the equality of the person in relation to all others. These are features which derive from reason and the awareness of human existence and constitute the link with fraternity, peaceful cooperation and coexistence.

Although the establishment of human rights has been declared to be the highest aim of mankind, we can see that every day, all over the world, they are being infringed, under conditions of 'legitimacy'. The anthropological shift in Modernity and the way of understanding autonomous ethics led to ethical humanism and unrestrained individualism. People have become 'the absolute arbiters of reality

and have subjected everything to their utilitarian/anthropocentric targets. Institutions and social structures, the organization of private and social life are shaped on the basis of our free will. Within the context of such personal freedom, every individual shapes his or her individual, personal ethic. This is set above every other person-and certainly other ethics- and is the cause of the infringement of human rights.

The greatest danger for human rights lies in their expansion. Every personal claim and individual demand represents an individual right and every effort is made to achieve it. Orthodoxy is considered to be anti-individualistic. The Orthodox critique of the idea of human rights centres on the matter of subjectivism. Individual salvation is held to be impossible without the salvation of others and the freedom of the person cannot be anything but communal and social. For Orthodox theology, the problem of the infringement of human rights lies in the lack of a spiritual dimension in contemporary society.

Certainly, the way to personal salvation is through the political social and cultural institutions of the world, which is why the Church cannot separate itself from the world, nor equate human salvation with a vague, after-death condition. Its anthropological model is Christ Himself. His task of saving the world accomplishes the reunification of people with God and the renewal of the person, as a free gift. Freedom here is not to be understood individually, but in terms of love, as a communion of persons, 'as expressed in the hypostatic union of the Holy Trinity, in a horizontal communal dimension grounded in the Divine Liturgy'.

For Orthodoxy, freedom and freely-given, selfless love are the features of a healthy political effort aimed at improving political life rather than a legal enshrinement of rights. Human freedom, which is a gift of divine grace, doesn't insist on claiming rights, but lies in a weft of love, woven into a sublime movement towards one's neighbor. The acceptance of the alterity of the Other relativizes the social and political character of the person, though without rejecting it. The ambition of the Church is far more radical than any political or philosophical ambition. It is not concerned only with peace, justice and the well-being of the population; its main care is that people should become real persons: that they should live as persons and not merely as individuals in a mass; that they should begin to experience eternity and not simply spend their lives peacefully, with insubstantial and unpredictable legal regulations.