11-1-2008

Faith and human rights: Christianity and the global struggle for human dignity

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Recommended Citation
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Faith and Human Rights: Christianity and the Global Struggle for Human Dignity
Richard Amesbury and George M. Newlands
Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008
127 pages, $8.50 paperback

Faith and Human Rights is the latest in the Facets series published by Fortress Press. This small volume offers a well-developed study of a crucially important and complex subject. Exploring the concept of human rights, the book recounts historical facts, provides useful definitions, examines philosophical and theological principles and raises pertinent questions. It shows how the idea of human rights has been both championed and denied by people of religious faith in the past, and it seeks a common ground that would enable people of all faiths as well as those of no religious faith to embrace the notion that every human being has dignity and deserves respect without the prerequisite of agreement on theistic beliefs.

Richard Amesbury, a moral philosopher from the Claremont School of Theology, California, and George M. Newlands, a theologian from Trinity College at the University of Glasgow, independently contribute chapters and collaborate on a final chapter which they call a postscript. Despite the independence of authorship, the chapters flow well from one to the other and the development of the subject matter makes sense. The co-authored postscript is both disappointing and challenging. More about that later.

The first chapter of the book engaged me with the compelling history of the struggle for human rights in El Salvador. Central to the story is Archbishop Oscar Romero and his inspiring example of how faith can engender political activism, motivating people to side with the poor and marginalized against a fearsome political system. Influenced by Romero and others, the Catholic Church in El Salvador relinquished privileges of power and became a beacon of hope for the people. This transformed relationship between the Church and the wider society stands in striking contrast to that Church’s historical role of legitimizing the ruling elite in El Salvador and thereby condoning oppression. It is an exciting and inspiring story.

The next three chapters authored by Amesbury take a more systematic tone. The meaning of “rights” and the obligations that arise from them is unwrapped in a logical and easily understood
analysis. A useful history of the evolution of the United Nations’
treaties and declarations on human rights is provided along with a
disturbing reminder of the ineffectiveness of the UN’s enforcement
mechanisms. Amesbury then posits the need to find a moral or
philosophical foundation to justify the idea that all humans deserve
dignity simply because they are human. He suggests that without a
universally accepted reason for human beings to care for each other, it
has been a simple matter for some people, including those of
religious faith, to view others as less than human and therefore
unworthy of basic human rights. An example that comes to mind for
me is the recent use of torture by the United States of America to
extract information from supposed terrorists held at Guantanamo
Bay. How can a nation that professes to be religiously motivated and
possessing of high moral principles deny such basic rights to
individuals who are perceived to be the enemy? Amesbury concludes
that it is impossible to find universal justification for human rights
grounded in any particular religion or in the philosophical concept of
a universal moral law. There is too much diversity in the traditions
from which religions and philosophies arise. A standard that does not
ground human rights in either divine command or moral law is
needed, but the struggle to articulate it continues unsuccessfully.

In chapters five and six, the book turns to a distinctly Christian
theological perspective on human rights. Now authored by Newlands,
the book takes the reader on an historical tour providing an
admittedly cursory survey of the low points and highlights of the
church’s record regarding human rights. As disciples of Christ, we
have much to repent as well as many instances of exemplary
behaviour for which to be thankful. Following the historical chapter,
Newlands develops an explanation of the relationship between
Christian theology and human rights which I found a bit hard to
follow. His key point is that God’s unconditional and self-
dispossessing love through the incarnation is God’s affirmation of the
value of human beings. Because Christ shared in the suffering that
human beings inflict on one another and subverted the forces of evil
through love, we are confident that God invests human life with
dignity. It is a good message regardless of the struggle I had in getting
it. Newlands ends with warnings against triumphalism and a
reminder that there are diverse understandings of God’s activity in
Christ, appealing for the reader’s acceptance of a Christology for