Human Rights in a Pluralist, Unequal Globe: Contributions of Jesuit Universities

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Globalization has made human rights both increasingly *important* as the normative standards that seek to shape the diverse religious, cultural, political, and economic interactions of our world, and also increasingly *controversial* in the face of the realities of cultural diversity and economic inequality. Over the past half a century, hopes that human rights could become truly effective standards of international behavior have risen and fallen like the tides.

1. The Contemporary Emergence of Human Rights

When the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in 1948, many saw it as a promise "never again" to tolerate genocide and as a commitment to resist the colonial domination of one people by another. Much of the recent discussion of global values has been formulated in terms of the emergent human rights ethic that has been a distinctive development of the post-World War II period. Indeed Mary Ann Glendon, a legal scholar who has traced the history of the drafting of the United Nations' 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* called the Declaration a charter for "a world made new." In the wake of the horrors of World War II, "the mightiest nations on earth bowed to the demands of smaller countries for recognition of a common standard by which the rights and wrongs of every nation's behavior could be measured."[1] The absence of such common standards was seen as one of the sources of war itself.

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From 1948 to 1989, however, Cold War ideological strife pushed human rights off the international agenda. But hopes rose again in the immediate post-Cold War period. For example, at the 1993 UN conference on human rights in Vienna, delegates representing 85% of the world's population reaffirmed the Declaration and declared that the universal binding power of the rights and freedoms it proclaimed was "beyond question." In today's post-9/11 world, however, the issue of universality is again hotly debated. Some see a rising "clash of civilizations" setting Western nations with their democratic values on a collision course with the religious-moral-legal system of Islamic sharī'a and with nations guided by Confucian traditions and "Asian values." Others, such as former U.S. President George W. Bush, see the human rights associated with Western democracy and free markets as the wave of the global future. Perceiving this as neo-imperial Western arrogance, some thinkers in formerly colonized countries of the global south, as well as Western academics of a postmodernist bent, reject human rights norms as incorrigibly Western in the name of a respect for diverse cultures.[2]

2. Developments in Catholic tradition in support human rights.

In the face of this ebb and flow of opinion, it is striking how strongly the Catholic church and its leadership have come to affirm human rights as the moral standards to which all nations and cultures should be held accountable. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries several popes rejected emerging modern human rights standards such as freedom of religion. They saw human rights as closely tied with the secularism of the French revolution, which would relegate religious belief to the margins of society, and with a focus on the rights of isolated individuals, which would dangerously undermine social solidarity and commitment to the common good. Less than a century later, however, the Second Vatican Council proclaimed that "the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person, as this

dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, no. 2). In a dramatic shift, the Council linked the full gamut of human rights with the very core of Christian faith. Since the Council, the church has become an activist supporter of human rights around the world. Beginning with support for a move from the authoritarian governments of Salazar and Franco to democracy in Portugal and Spain in the 1970s, to a struggle against military dictatorships, death squads and martial law in Latin America and the Philippines during the 1980s, to opposition to communist rule in Poland that contributed to the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the church has become an institutional activist for human rights. Thus one political scientist has concluded that these striking developments have made the church the world's leading force for the advancement of human rights and democracy.[3]

The reasons for this dramatic change in church teaching on human rights can teach us much about their importance today. The bloody experience of the wars of the twentieth century led both secular society and the Catholic community to a new awareness that peace is dependent on respect for human dignity and human rights. Disastrous conflicts like World Wars I and II followed almost inevitably when peoples were divided by attitudes of us-versus-them based on nationality, religion, or ethnicity. These conflicts made the twentieth century the bloodiest in human history. Similarly, in group-out group division was at the root of the colonial domination of the global south by the global north which often left colonized peoples no alternative but to resort to violent revolt as the only way to throw off the domination oppressing them. Similarly, today's bloody ethnic and religious conflicts are rooted in a denial of the common humanity that universal human rights seek to defend.

The contemporary human rights ethic thus seeks to tear down the walls dividing people into those who count and those who do not count. To affirm human rights means that the

inherent dignity of all members of the human family must become the organizing basis for the social and political life of global society. The Declaration of Human Rights is universal because it applies to every human being. No white rule over non-white; no Aryan over Jew, no European colonist over non-European colonized, no male superiority to female. The experience of the consequences of dividing the human community into "us" and "them" was the driving force behind the creation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It remains central to the human rights ethos today.

Recognition that the emerging human rights ethic was an expression of our common humanity led to Pope John XXIII to an unambiguous stand in support of human rights based on the dignity of the person created in the image of God. John XXIII's 1963 encyclical *Pacem in Terris* supported the full range of human rights proclaimed by the Universal Declaration, both the civil-political rights such as free speech and self-governance and the social-economic rights such as rights to food and health care. Religious convictions must never be used to deny human rights in the name of God. Similarly, ethnic identity is never a legitimate basic for excluding people from the most basic requirements of their human dignity. Thus human rights challenge all closed nationalisms. Human rights stand opposed to all tendencies to turn ethnic identity into grounds for political privilege or that lead to the oppression of other ethnic groups. Human rights also call for solidarity across economic divisions. Thus they challenge the grave inequalities and economic divisions that mar our globalizing world.

3. Church action for Human Rights

During the period since the Vatican II there have been many examples of church personnel exercising leadership on the defense of human rights, often at considerable risk. In the early 1970s the Chilean church's *Vicaria de la Solidaridad* was a clear voice in opposition to the torture and disappearances carried out under the dictatorship of General Augusto Pinochet. Work for the *Vicaria* led to exile and even loss of life. The *Vicaria's* objections to torture were anticipated in Vatican II's declaration that "physical and mental torture . . . are criminal: they poison civilization; and they debase the perpetrators more than the victims and militate against the honor of the creator" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 27). The rejection of torture has been reaffirmed in the context of United States responses to terrorism today. Speaking on behalf of the U.S. bishops' international policy committee, Bishop Thomas Wenski courageously reminded U.S. legislators that "prisoner mistreatment compromises human dignity. A respect for the dignity of every person, ally or enemy, must serve as the foundation of security, justice and peace. There can be no compromise on the moral imperative to protect the basic human rights of any individual incarcerated for any reason."

Similarly, in 1986 the Philippine bishops stood firmly against Ferdinand Marcos's effort to steal an election. They issued a ringing declaration that Marcos's claim that to election was fraudulent and his effort to remain in power lacked moral legitimacy. The bishops' defense of the right to self-government aligned them with the "people power" movement that brought Corazon Aquino to the office of president. Similar forms of church support for democracy occurred in South Korea, Lithuania, Poland, Brazil, Peru, South Africa, and elsewhere.

It is true, of course, that the church's engagement in the struggle for human rights has not been uniform and consistent in all countries. In Argentina during the so-called dirty war of the late 70s and early 80s, church leadership remained too closely linked with the repressive regime.

In the truly horrific Rwanda genocide of 1994, the most Catholic country in Africa descended into the ultimate form of human rights violation. Some Rwandan clerics actually supported the genocidal murders, and some bishops failed to resist. So there can be no doubt that the movement of the Catholic community toward active support for human rights has been uneven. Nonetheless, it is also true that church leaders and members have helped create a major global force for the promotion of human rights.

4. The contribution of Jesuit universities

A key question for Jesuit universities is how they can help both the church and the larger secular community improve and advance on the achievements they have made. Human rights are an essential aspect of an "integral and shared humanism" that links all people together in mutual responsibility for their destiny. [4] Catholic religious motivation for commitment to human rights overlaps with the secular philosophical motives that lead nonbelievers to work for human rights. It also grounds the hope that interreligious and cross-cultural agreement on human rights is possible even in our diverse, pluralistic world.

Exploring the intellectual grounds for such potential agreement across diverse cultural and religious traditions should be a major contribution of the Jesuit university to the advancement of human rights in our time. The Catholic tradition possesses distinctive intellectual resources for responding to the cultural challenge of human rights in the face of globalization. The negative face of this challenge is evident in the way the strains of globalization are often accompanied by self-defensive religious fundamentalisms and reassertions of ethnic identity. Reactive assertions of identity in the face of globalization are among the key sources of conflict and war today.[5] It is here that Jesuit universities can draw

from the best of the Catholic intellectual tradition to enable the Catholic community to collaborate with other traditions to support the human rights of all persons.

The very word "catholic" implies a community that is universal in scope but that does not project a single vision of the good life on others in imperialistic fashion. Thus Jesuit, Catholic universities have a very important role in advancing the intellectual understanding that enables people of diverse traditions to understand one another and thus come to support each others common humanity and respect each others fundamental rights. In a globalizing world we are fated to interact across cultural and religious boundaries. Today the question is whether such interaction will be peaceful or violent, mutual or hegemonic. If it is to be peaceful and mutual, it requires both listening and speaking in a genuine conversation across the boundaries that have traditionally divided the world. This listening and speaking is a form of solidarity—a form that requires reciprocal respect for one another's rights and mutual effort to understand one another. The understanding that leads to respect for human rights through intellectual solidarity is thus part of the mission of the Jesuit and Catholic university.

The Jesuit university is also called to serious academic exploration of the meaning of economic and social rights in a globalizing world marked by deep inequality. Human rights, as understood both in the Universal Declaration and in Catholic social thought, challenge all forms of globalization that reinforce inequality and existing patterns of exclusion, whether these be economic, political, or cultural. Human rights, properly understood, are the most basic requirements of social solidarity. In the words of the United States Catholic bishops, human rights are the "minimum conditions for life in community." [6] These rights protect the kind of participation based on the equality of all persons that should shape the social and economic institutions of our globalizing world. Thus human rights require that all persons be guaranteed

basic nutrition, education, health care, access to a job with a just wage, and social security provisions. Without these minimum guarantees people will be unjustly marginalized from participation in the human community. Thus human rights raise major challenges to the global economic situation of today. Jesuit universities should be in the forefront of those seeking to address these challenges.

There are, therefore, many ways that Jesuit universities can contribute to advancing the cause of human rights in our globalizing world, both within the Catholic community itself and in the larger, religiously diverse world. Let me briefly suggest just a few.

1. The educational mission of Jesuit universities should lead students to a deeper understanding of the common humanity they share with people of other religious, cultural, and ethnic traditions. Education that supports human rights will be education in dialogue across diverse traditions. The network of Jesuit institutions of higher learning around the world is a unique resource for such transnational, transcultural and interreligious education. We need to develop creative ways to tap the potential of this unique resource.
2. Jesuit education should be education in the social solidarity that is essential if the most basic economic rights of the poor of today's global society are to share even minimally in the resources needed to protect their basic dignity. This requires both intellectually serious investigation of how global economic institutions can and should be changed so they provide these rights to all. It also calls for a kind of experiential engagement by students with poor people in ways that can help them develop a genuine sense of solidarity.
3. Jesuit professors should be enabled to conduct collaborative research that reaches across the national, cultural, economic, and religious boundaries that divide our world. Intellectual

solidarity across these borders should become a hallmark of the style of Jesuit universities. It will enable professors to make their most important contributions to human rights.

4. The Catholic church's commitment to the equal dignity and equal rights of all persons is frequently accompanied in official church teaching by support for a kind of "complementarity" of the roles of men and women. This often slides into a claim that women should be excluded from some of these roles. How this is compatible with genuine equality is rarely clear. So there is urgent need for serious intellectual exploration of the intersection of gender roles and equal human rights in the diverse cultures of the world. In light of the 34th General Congregation's Decree on Jesuits and the Situation of Women in Church and Civil Society, Jesuit universities should be in the forefront of efforts to advance Catholic reflection on and practice of the equal human rights of women
5. Among the persons whose human rights are most gravely violated today are refugees and migrants. Jesuit universities can and should collaborate with each other and with the Jesuit Refugee service in developing advocacy strategies to promote the rights of the displaced.

Genuinely global education, of its essence, is education for human rights whenever it is truly education in the humanities. Any education that is truly humanistic will be education in the struggles and opportunities facing the global human family. It will be education that leads to deeper understanding of and stronger commitment to the rights of all persons. Because it is truly education in humanity, it will be Christian education as well.

Endnotes

[1] Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2001), xv.

[2] See, for example, Mahmood Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

[3] Samuel Huntington, "Religion and the Third Wave," *National Interest* 24 (Summer 1991), 29-42.

[4] See *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2004), no. 6.

[5] For an influential argument to this effect, see Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

[6]National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All,* no. 79. In David O'Brien and Thomas Shannon, *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 576-77.