

HUMAN DIGNITY

INSIGHTS

The Faculty Journal of Austin Seminary



FALL 1998

GARCÍA • ENGELHARDT • GEORGE • WADELL • GOODLOE
JINKINS • MUCK • BLACK JOHNSTON

INSIGHTS

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COVER: Diego Rivera (1886-1957)

"La Molendera," 1924
Encáustica sobre tela
90x117 cm
Col. Museo Nacional de Arte
Fotografía: Arturo Piera

Mexican muralist Diego Rivera is renowned and beloved for his grand depictions of the joys and struggles of human life. "La Molendera," the simple, yet striking image of a woman laboring to produce her family's daily bread, evokes the tension that inhabits all of Rivera's work—the daily mixture of rest and toil, work and celebration of which human life is comprised. Human dignity emerges from these same disparate ingredients, ground out and shaped by the hands of the creating God who nourishes and sustains us.

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INTRODUCTION

Someone has said that the power or significance of any idea or essay is found in the degree of passion it evokes from others, either in agreement or disagreement. If that is accurate, then the address titled “On Human Dignity,” delivered by Professor Ismael García on the occasion of his inauguration as a full professor at Austin Seminary, should receive very high marks. You will, however, want to make a judgment for yourself as you read the address and reflect upon the responses.

Professor García’s lecture certainly presents a number of provocative ideas for anyone interested in and committed to the welfare of all human beings. While he resists any simplistic approach to the variety of issues relating to human dignity, he successfully deepens the reader’s understanding of those issues, even as he highlights their complexity.

In sum, Dr. García argues that human dignity is both a gift (or a given) and a struggle. It is a gift and a struggle at all levels of existence—moral, cultural, personal, political, and economic.

Taking sharp issue with the basic approach of Professor García is Dr. James C. Goodloe, a Presbyterian pastor. Dr. Goodloe’s appraisal of the address is that it is sorely lacking in theological undergirding and that it rests fundamentally on secular arguments and not theological ones. Dr. H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., professor in the department of philosophy at Rice University, makes a similar argument in his essay, insisting that Christianity “invites all to step away from seeking dignity through others’ affirmation of their own intrinsic dignity, but instead to pursue affirmation and dignity in Christ.” Likewise, Dr. Sherron George, Professor García’s faculty colleague, poses certain questions about “the modern notion of autonomy” which she sees reflected in the lecture, and Professor Paul J. Wadell of St. Norbert College in his response wants to center the matter of human dignity in the worship and prayer experience of the church.

It all makes for stimulating reading. It is our hope that the material in this edition of *Insights* will provide much food for thought about a most important matter. As always, this publication is offered as a gift to the church for its use.

Robert M. Shelton



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ON HUMAN DIGNITY

ISMAEL GARCÍA

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

This year we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Considering the disagreements and heated debates nations sustain within and among themselves regarding the form and substance of human rights; considering all their posturing regarding their compliance, or lack of compliance, with human rights; in light of the accusations that human rights are just another manifestation of Western cultural imperialism; and given the moral relativism and subjectivism that presently defines our culture’s ethos, the fact that the language of human rights has established itself as the moral language all peoples of the world recognize as normative for defining how humans ought to be treated is a momentous historical achievement, and one worth celebrating.

As postmodern thinkers challenge us to reconsider our moral categories and visions, it might be a propitious time for us to look at that which I take to be the foundational concept behind the human rights debate: the concept of human dignity.

To begin with, I would like to point to a duality intrinsic to the language of human dignity. On the one hand we claim that human dignity is a “given,” a “gift,” or something innate to our nature. On the other hand we recognize that dignity is a historical struggle. As “given,” or “gift,” the language of dignity is used to point to the stuff that enables us to recognize others as our equals and worthy of recognition, respect, and care. From this point of view, neither the family, society, nor the state are the source of our dignity, nor can

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they take our dignity away from us. These institutions, at best, can only structure themselves and act in ways that acknowledge and respect our dignity. Dignity, thus, is a radically egalitarian concept; we all have it, and have it in the same way, and under no circumstances can we lose it. One cannot avoid noticing the religious nature of such a claim.

However, when pushed to its logical conclusion, this notion of dignity as “given” is counterintuitive. If we accept that the family, society, and the state are not the source of our dignity, we also recognize that these institutions do have the power to either significantly diminish or forward the realization of our dignity. We believe that struggles against oppression and domination are necessary, meaningful, and justifiable. And thus that dignity is not just a given, but in the language of liberation theologians, a historical project.

This sense of human dignity as both gift and historical task is dialectical. This dialectic reveals itself more clearly in the voice of disenfranchised people and nations. People that struggle against domination and oppression argue that their dignity is the motivating force that enables them to endure the risks and costs of their struggles. At the same time, they claim that achieving human dignity is the purpose of their struggles. Dignity thus constitutes both the beginning (the cause) and end (the goal) of their struggle for social transformation, greater self-determination, and self-respect. I take this circular mode of reasoning to be neither vicious nor meaningless. It merely points to the mystery of the human condition: that it is precisely in the struggle to enhance our freedom, equality, and community that we give depth and greater specificity to our sense of dignity.

THE THEOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

The predominant explanation given for human dignity in Western culture has been one which links humankind with God. Ultimately, it is because God relates to us and treats us with steadfast love and with respect that we are called to treat others with love and respect. Since the ethos of modernity became dominant, Christians have come to use the language of human rights to give content to what this love and respect entails. This was not always the case. The pre-modern church militantly opposed modernity’s struggle for human rights, viewing it as another attempt of secular humanism to undermine the church’s influence and usurp the authority of religion.¹

It is somewhat ironic that, as the church has belatedly come to accept the language of human rights, postmodern thinkers, such as the North American ethicist John Caputo and the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, have brought back the language of moral obligation which was the dominant moral language of the pre-modern church.² Many postmodernists denounce and reject the language of human rights on the basis of its being overly individualistic, abstract, universal, legalistic, and conflict-ridden. In its stead they propose the language of moral obligation as being group- and communal-oriented, concerned with and focused on the needs of others, committed to

social and cultural diversity, and intentional in granting a public voice and recognition to marginal social groups. Add to this their strong commitment to justice for the poor, and it is no surprise that the postmodern ethical agenda is attractive to oppressed and marginal groups and those who are in solidarity with them.

However, we ought to remain suspicious of this shift in language. The moral language of obligation, in both its pre-modern and postmodern versions, has a strong paternalistic bent to it. Within our present social circumstances, where we lack the structural basis to clearly know what our obligation and responsibilities to others are, the language of moral obligations, practically speaking, functions like charity, something those who amass wealth and power might want to exercise toward those who lack both of these. The danger is that the poor and powerless, in spite of the best of intentions of those who uphold the language of moral obligation, are reduced to the status of being passive recipients of other people’s graces. They are not assured of an essential element of moral agency—the right of making claims and of asserting their interests and views with authority.

The enduring strength and the persuasiveness of the language of human rights and of the Enlightenment sense of emancipation and self-realization is precisely that it recognizes oppressed peoples and social groups as moral agents. It curtails the inclination of the non-poor to treat marginalized people as mere victims and provides all of us with better safeguards that assure us a voice to determine how—personally, politically, and historically—we want to organize our lives.

The specific way faith communities understand human rights is determined by how they understand God’s covenant relationship with humanity. In the Christian tradition our dignity has its foundation in the way God has chosen to relate to us through God’s creation, God’s incarnation, and God’s redemption.

CREATION IMAGO DEI

At the center of the Christian understanding of human dignity lies the doctrine of creation, which affirms the intrinsic goodness of all creation. This doctrine serves as the ground for both the church’s quite recent rediscovery of its ecological responsibilities and its traditional understanding of human dignity. Our dignity, and the respect due to us because of it, finds its ground in our being created in the image of God. Our intelligence, memory, imagination, freedom, and the capacity to transform our social and natural world are signs of our being creative agents that share in God’s image and likeness.

This doctrine can and ought to empower us both to transform our subjective self-understanding and to engage in liberating political commitments. It can motivate us to free ourselves from those feelings of superiority by which we mask our undue privileges and self-interests as being among those inalienable rights others have a duty to attend, and that we conveniently use

to give ourselves permission to be apathetic to the legitimate rights claims of others. It can equally free us from those feelings of inferiority that make us accomplices to the injustices present within our social world. It exhorts the poor and non-poor to transcend their narrow self-interest and self-centeredness, and engage in what the religious philosopher Cornel West calls a “politics of compassion,” aiming at the creation of bonds and structures of solidarity among those who formerly saw each other as strangers and/or enemies.³ From this perspective it can be argued that if liberation best defines the politics of the poor and marginal, generous accountability ought to define the politics of the non-poor. It might very well be that this is what Derrida⁴ has in mind when he claims that commitment to justice for the poor is one of our central moral obligations.

And as the innermost being of our trinitarian God is relational, this doctrine also makes us aware that we have been created to live in and for relationships with others and with nature. From our faith perspective, neither our social life nor our dominion over nature is merely instrumental. They are both constitutive of the dignity of persons. Dominion over nature, as we have recently come to accept, calls us be stewards and to make the earth part of our community. Our feeding from nature must be such that nature is able to feed or replenish itself as well. From a theological point of view, human rights are an experience of and for moral solidarity. Individuals have rights claims over the community, and the community has rights claims over the individual. The rights that protect human dignity are the rights of persons in community, not the rights of the individual against the community nor of the community against the individual. Human rights presuppose that persons recognize each other as bound by a community of mutual dependence committed to overcome the conventional barriers that divide and exclude and which keep us in conflict with each other.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE INCARNATION

The doctrine of the incarnation gives greater specificity to the notion of dignity present in the doctrine of creation. That God chose to reveal Godself through a person clearly uplifts the unique dignity of the human. In Jesus it is revealed both how God relates to us and how we ought to relate to God. God relates to us through steadfast service; divinity’s service is, in itself, an affirmation of our worth and value. But more importantly it is God’s way of disclosing that our dignity is intrinsically tied with the practice of serving and contributing to the life possibilities of others.

In Jesus it is revealed that we share not only a common definition as image of God but a common historical task, that of contributing to the coming of the promised kingdom. The authenticity of one’s self-realization and emancipation is found in one’s becoming an active agent for the emergence of a reconciled world that signals God’s kingdom. To live for the kingdom is to live a life of faithful service, love, and care, particularly toward those whom

our society has created poor and oppressed. Jesus’ ministry of liberation for the unfree, the blind, the sick, and the poor, and his acceptance of suffering on their behalf, gives us some sense of the content and direction of our commitment to human rights.

It is through liberating acts of service that we voluntarily make “others” a constitutive part of our lives and we become part of theirs. We thus create covenantal bonds that point to a future of utopian brotherhood and sisterhood. This reunion, the product of our steadfast service, is what gives concrete substance to our notion of love and justice. Love is the power that inclines us to strive for greater and more inclusive harmonious unity within all spheres of creation. And justice is that dimension of love in which we commit ourselves to the creation of a new future where the poor and marginal enjoy the full recognition and benefits of membership within our shared community.⁵

THE DOCTRINE OF REDEMPTION

If the doctrine of creation is the foundation of our sense of dignity, and the doctrine of the incarnation gives dignity historical specificity and direction, the doctrine of redemption points to the unconditional character of our dignity. Simply stated, God’s salvific work on our behalf affirms that no one, no matter how virtuous or sinful, no matter how enlightened or ignorant, no matter how simple or talented, is kept at the margin of God’s love. Or, as stated in the Reformed tradition, no matter how vilified we are we never lose that substance of the divine within us. Thus we are to recognize the dignity of all people at all times and treat them as such.

Historically the Reformed tradition has shown passionate dedication to issues dealing with the nature, function, and formation of the social realm. It has taken seriously the political responsibilities and the rights of citizens. It is also part of its genius to heighten our awareness of the depth of the reality of sin. Consequently, the Reformed tradition has insisted on our need of and dependence on revelation and grace for us to be able to understand and act in ways that affirm human dignity. In the Reformed frame of mind we are redeemed not because of, but mostly in spite of, our best works and efforts. However, the tradition has also understood that if we are not saved *by* good works, our dignity is in that we have been created *for* good works. Our stature as moral agents is neither diminished nor destroyed by the gift of redemption. If anything, redemption ought to heighten our sense of dignity, and this renewed self-esteem ought to motivate us toward a more steadfast commitment to transform our moral laxity into moral discipline, our ignorance into wisdom, our sloth into personal responsibility, and to make whole the brokenness of our personal and communal life.

For the Reformed tradition the fact that dignity is a historical task need not undermine our religious conviction that dignity is a gift from God. God’s gift of dignity entails autonomy. God does not coerce us, but rather invites us

to be God's people. We are invited as moral agents capable of responsible historical-political actions. In the absence of autonomy and in the absence of our capacity to become historical, moral, and political agents, the concept of dignity is meaningless. In this way, the Reformed frame of mind brings together some of the best insights regarding the biblical tradition's sense of submission and dependence on God, the authority of God, and the sense of autonomy of the Enlightenment.

In short, our dignity is unveiled through God's act of creation, incarnation, and redemption, all of which entail an invitation to be active participants in God's providential plan for humanity. We have been invited by God to fulfill a historical purpose, that of being a blessing to all peoples—to exercise our dignity as free agents, re-creators of nature and builders of future communities that are inclusive, life-giving, and life-sustaining. These are the marks by which God lets us know that God loves us, wants the best for us, and that we are of value to God.

THE MORAL-HISTORICAL DIMENSION OF HUMAN DIGNITY

It is impossible to define human dignity and human rights a priori, as if they were essences waiting to be made manifest. Rights claims are historical creations that involve judgments and justifications that usually take place as responses to significant social and political events. They express what it means or what it takes to be human within specific social and historical circumstances and relationships, and derive more precise definition within the historical struggles communities engage in to enhance their freedoms, forward social equality, and advance their corporate well-being. The right to work, for example, is quite recent. It emerged when the process of industrialization freed laborers, separated labor from the tools of work, and made wage labor necessary for survival.

The social structure and the social ethos from within which rights emerge have a prominent role in determining what our rights are, their priority, and how to adjudicate the conflicting rights claims that are an inevitable part of communal life. Thus, wealthy nations give priority to the rights of liberty, poor nations to economic and social rights, and colonized nations emphasize the rights to cultural independence and to self-determination.⁶

It is important to recognize that these rights are mutually related, so much so that when we seriously disregard one of them, we risk losing all of them. Theologically speaking, all our rights are ultimately grounded on the One God, and, as such, are equally valid and worthy of our commitment. Politically speaking, our task is to push for the realization of those rights which our social context tends to disregard.

As we mentioned, the language of human rights has helped us the most in expressing what we value in humanity and thus in defining what human dignity is. What do we value? We value our embodied existence and recognize our right to seek our physical well-being and, to the best of our abili-

ties, to contribute to the physical well-being of others. Missionaries who come to our churches armed with their slide projectors know quite well that they can count on our prayers and economic support because, both at the level of feeling and at the level of abiding convictions, we believe that indifference to the bodily needs of those "others" they advocate for constitutes a violation of both their dignity and ours. Let me emphasize, material well-being is not just a means to a dignified life but is integral to what it means to have and to treat others with dignity. What is ultimately at stake is not just money, but the status of membership within the national and world community and being integrated as full participants within all spheres of the society one belongs to. This explains why the *right to existence or to life*, basic to what it means to be human, is stated in most human rights codes.

We also value our existence as cultural beings. We make rights claims not only to those goods and services that nurture our bodies, but also over goods and services that enable us to develop as creative cultural agents. We want to be truthfully informed and want to participate in the artistic creations of our community. Thus we claim our right to forms of training and educational opportunities that enrich our lives and enable us to develop our potentials.

An enduring element of modernity's sense of dignity is its flexibility. While it has had a strong individualistic bent, today it affirms our right to participate in those structures of meaning that define the uniqueness of our group identity. We long for resources and more public spaces that allow us to enjoy and realize ourselves as the distinct cultural creatures that we are. Today many human rights codes include what is called the *right of self development*.

Thirdly, we value the human capacity to act autonomously. Autonomy is at the center of the Enlightenment's understanding of human dignity and, in my view, what gives modernity's understanding of self-realization and emancipation its vitality and enduring historical presence. We claim the right of every person to determine their vocation and the kind of life they find worth living. Socially and politically speaking, dignity entails nurturing a democratic ethos within more spheres of life. We seek to expand those public spaces where we are consulted and recognized as active participants in the determination of our personal, group, and collective destiny. We even want to determine and control our biological make-up, and thus it comes as no surprise that the topic of human dignity has become a dominant concern of the human cloning debate.⁷ We want democratic processes to rule not just the political sphere but also the economic, the religious, the social, and the cultural spheres of life. These are the rights included under the rubric the *right of self-determination* that is also present in most human rights codes.

The right to existence, the right to self-development, and the right to self-determination constitute the minimum rights identified with our sense of human dignity or of that which is necessary to make and keep life human. I will develop their implications at the end of my comments.

Since I strongly affirm the language of human rights as giving greater depth and clarity to our understanding of human dignity, I want to acknowledge the need to keep a critical attitude toward the interpretation of human rights dominant in our social context. The postmodernists, as well as other critical voices, claim that the quest for emancipation and self-realization, intrinsic to the ethos of modernity, is merely a disguised form of egoistic self-indulgence. They argue that:

1) Modernity's understanding and pursuit of personal emancipation and fulfillment is narrowly individualistic, radically conflictive, and supportive of aggressive competitiveness, all of which cement anti-communitarian attitudes. We have become a society of litigators. More and more we are dependent on the court to decide how we are to organize our life and settle our conflicts. Our politics no longer focus on the art of discussion and compromise, proper to a process of legislation that seeks inclusiveness and which attempts to arrive at the "sense of the community." Legislation has become thoroughly conflict-ridden, a process of judicial reviews on rights where winner takes all, leaving our political community fragmented, divided, and resentful, no matter the outcome. The abortion debate has shown this clearly. Rights claims are understood as absolute claims to be enforced even at the expense of society, rather than as protective devices for the sake of forwarding and sustaining community.

2) Our sense of human fulfillment and emancipation is not only radically egocentric but also subjective. It promotes what is known as the culture of therapy, a culture that through the power of media and the market's plentiful production of alluring and tantalizing consumer goods, makes pleasure, comfort, security, and feeling good about ourselves the main purpose and end of life. As long as I am able to manipulate the way I perceive myself, and as long as I feel good about myself, it really does not matter whether or not I am faithful to my promises and commitments, whether or not I contribute to society, or whether or not I perform my duties.

3) Such radical self-absorption leads to moral subjectivism, relativism, and permissiveness. In moral matters feelings and taste overshadow reason. As morality is reduced to taste, all our choices become equally valid and we need not justify them. The only moral concern is not to harm. The act of choosing itself, not what is chosen, is what is morally relevant. We are left with no sense of values that are prior, and higher than ourselves, for which we are willing to sacrifice. In fact, the language of suffering and sacrifice is seen as *passé*.

There is much truth to these critiques of modernity. Who can deny that the aggressive pursuit of career development, the quest for greater autonomy and control over more dimensions of our life, and the inclination to unlimited consumption and personal gratification do make life shallow and place tremendous strains on family commitments, friendships, and communal ties of all sorts. Still, before dismissing modernity's quest for emancipation and

self-realization, one should at least pause to consider why its vision has been, and continues to be, morally normative for so many of us. Could it be that modernity's quest for emancipation and self-realization does not necessarily entail moral subjectivism, permissive self-indulgence, rampant consumerism, or lack of commitment to causes beyond our narrow self-interest?

In my view, the normative substance of the ethos of modernity and its sense of emancipation and self-realization is still meaningful and viable. This is the same unfinished and unfulfilled ethos that has, not without struggle and great sacrifice, given motivation to the struggle for justice and for social inclusion of marginal social classes, genders, and races. It has shown itself capable of significant flexibility, even to voice the imperative to respond to the needs of our natural environment, its true silent victim. I am not persuaded that at present there are available to us stronger visions of emancipation and fulfillment.

Our theological-biblical tradition has helped and must continue to help us redefine modernity's notion of human dignity and human rights in ways that allow us to recover the liberating ethos toward freedom, equality, justice, and community that is part of its original and still unfinished liberating vision.

Let me provide a more specific and concrete vision—not a final one—of the elements that presently inform our sense of human dignity.

At the personal level

Without disregarding or minimizing the determining influences of the social settings and communities we live in, dignity centers on our being free moral agents who must assume responsibility for our actions. Dignity entails discipline and responsibility within all spheres of life. The difference we can make in our personal life we have a responsibility to make. From the simple processes of body hygiene, keeping proper diets, and regular exercise to the more complex processes of enhancing our cultural development, cultivating the virtues that shape our character, and exercising those spiritual disciplines related to the care of our soul, we must be pro-active and exercise our freedom in a disciplined and responsible manner.

Dignity requires that we recognize all humans as ends in themselves, and recognize ourselves as those humans. Dignity calls us to voice our interest and assert our life-plan as being as worthy of consideration as the life plans of others. We must be firm in the pursuit of our own self-care and resist being made mere instruments for the well-being of others.⁸ However, as we strongly affirm the legitimacy of self-love, we must also recognize that our natural inclination is always to attend to our own needs first. Practically speaking, it is best to start by giving priority to the needs of others. In fact, the legitimacy of self-love is grounded on the commitment to take into account and respond to the interest and needs of others as we go about determining and pursuing that which is good for us.

At the social level

Human dignity thus is essentially relational. Our sense of dignity as well as our self-realization and emancipation is tied to that of others. The best of modernity affirms that self-fulfillment and emancipation cannot take place without our positive contributions to the needs and life possibilities of others. In Kantian terms we are not just ends in ourselves but called to become members of a *kingdom of ends*. The paradox of authenticity is that we obtain it not by pursuing it directly but as the by-product of serving the needs of others.

The social and relational dimension of human dignity has also been recognized by non-Christian thinkers. Charles Taylor⁹ and Hannah Arendt, for example, argue that in our social context, social recognition has become an indispensable human need, so much so that to be denied social recognition is to be harmed in a significant way. Social anonymity and lack of recognition is an affront to one's dignity. Social anonymity is the first step in being made socially invisible and silent, and the socially invisible and silent are the ones most likely to be treated as mere instruments of the visions and plans of others.

Both authors acknowledge that dignity requires the creation of more public spaces within different social spheres where we can be recognized by others as responsible and contributing members of society. These public spaces, where the community gathers in all its diversity to witness to each other's words and deeds, enable all of us to discover our identity, our originality, our authenticity, and thus, our dignity. Dignity is mediated by the social structures that limit and give order to our mutual dealings. Thus, the task of dignity entails that social structures are to be transformed in light of our growing and changing sense of (paraphrasing Paul Lehmann) what keeps human life human. To become just, we need structural supports that make us act justly; to grant others recognition, we need structures that allow us to be recognized.

The Apostle Paul understood that every worthwhile historical task, like the task of forwarding dignity through the creation of structures that are loving and just, entails sacrifice and might elicit suffering. In Paul's case the church is the community that is called to undertake such suffering and sacrifice. The centrality of sacrifice and suffering for the sake of love and justice is also present in the Beatitudes. In my biased reading of the Beatitudes, we are told that it is not dignified to tolerate the injustices committed against the poor and weak. The suffering which is the product of social injustices diminishes the dignity of all of us—but most importantly the dignity of God. We are not to tolerate it; on the contrary, we must resist it. On the other hand, we are to endure with courage and determination and even joy the suffering that is imposed upon us as a result of our faithfulness to God's justice, since this suffering is redemptive—historically, soteriologically, and even cosmically. This suffering and sacrifice edifies our sense of dignity and the dignity of those we struggle with and struggle for. In light of the biblical ethos, the lan-

guage of human rights will have historical efficacy only insofar as there are women and men who are prepared and willing to take upon themselves the rights of humanity and stand up for the oppressed and dominated.

At the cultural level

Social pluralism and the struggles of racial-ethnic groups and poor nations have made us recognize that dignity is connected with the struggle against cultural discrimination and for cultural affirmation. This is why marginalized groups and nations, as part of their sense of liberation, claim the right to resources to live in light of those traditions and cultural values that nurture their sense of meaning and identity.¹⁰

Loyalty to those social groups that mold our character and to the traditions and ways of life they represent is also a matter of social survival. However, loyalty to cultural traditions entails more than adaptation and repetition of what has been handed down to us. The preservation of tradition is most authentic when it brings forth and sustains new cultural expressions which allow us to meet the multiple challenges brought to us in our fast-changing world. The process by which we contribute to the furthering of our cultural heritage, therefore, is one and the same as the process by which we give depth to our dignity.

One of the highest manifestations of our commitment to human dignity is expressed in our capacity not just to tolerate cultural diversity, but to contribute in positive ways to the preservation of cultural expressions other than our own. Such a contribution shows respect for and recognition of the rights of others, which is stronger and less paternalistic than mere tolerance.¹¹

At the economic level

In our society money dominates all spheres of life. This is why we have come to uphold both negative rights—not to be deprived of our property and of the fruits of our labor—and positive rights—to be assisted in times of crisis and/or when subjected to dehumanizing need. To be recognized, integrated, and counted as full members of society we must have access to an adequate amount of capital. Intuitively we recognize the deception of consumerism—the belief that we exist for the sake of having. Still, within a society ruled by the impersonal laws of the market, one must *have* in order to *be*. As we mentioned, in a society like ours, not having becomes a first step to not being. Thus we have affirmed: humans have the right to a voice in the determination of our nation's economic priorities; the right to work and to an adequate wage that enables us to support, clothe, feed, and house ourselves and our family; the right to create associations, for example unions and professional guilds which defend our economic interests; the right to health care; and the creation of some form of social security or a social safety net for protection in time of crisis.

In our social context, money is so tied to our sense of dignity that at dif-

ferent times, and in different ways, we have considered and proposed the need to guarantee citizens a minimum income. We prefer that this income be derived through meaningful work, but in those cases when neither the private nor public sector can provide a person with work, each person must be provided with money. We have done so because we know that when denied certain levels of consumption, our life plans are frustrated and our dignity is significantly violated.

At the political level

If having is at the service of being, the political dimension of our existence enjoys a certain priority in the realization of human dignity. Dignity has to do as much with sharing and exercising power as with having access to the goods and services that nurture the body. Dignity is related to the struggle to create and nurture a pluralistic society that allows its members the right to a voice and active participation within all the centers of decision-making that affect their lives in significant ways. Thus we claim the right: to assembly; to propagate our ideas; to freedom of thought, religion, and speech; to freedom from torture and arbitrary imprisonment; to security from discrimination and prejudicial harassment; and to freedom from degrading treatment. And we also structure our lives in ways that support the separation of power, the open and frequent competition for public office, and the creation of spaces for voluntary associations that are self-determining.

Voluntary associations, a unique North American invention, present us with alternative values and lifestyles to those advocated by the state. They have the potential for becoming communities of resistance committed to justice beyond the vision of the dominant political community. It is not by accident that most African-American Christians understand the church as a community of resistance¹² and for the realization of universal brotherhood and sisterhood, far beyond what the state might be willing to recognize and contribute to as legitimate.

Few experiences enhance and nurture our sense of dignity more than the political tasks of organizing ourselves to achieve our self-given goals. The narratives that depict the struggles of both the Civil Rights movement in the United States and the base communities in Latin and Central America recount how the dignity of the poor was and is significantly enhanced as they discover their capacity to organize themselves and achieve the religious, political, economic, and social ends they give themselves. For many people it is the church that provides a mini-public space for them to experience the organizational and political skills of community-concerted actions.

Our communal self-realization and identity is seriously undermined by the politics of lobbying and narrow self-interest. Conversely, it is most authentic when we see ourselves as being connected to others in the quest, within history and nature, of something larger than our narrow self-interest—as when whites struggle for the rights of blacks, humans for the care of nature,

men for the emancipation of women, and elders for the well-being of children. Human dignity necessitates the common pursuit of values like the ones just mentioned, values that bind us together and give us the sense that we do share community. At present, justice for the poor and concern for nature provide two objective standards and political causes that serve as ideals, beyond and larger than our self-interests and worthy of our sacrifice, and that are capable of allowing us to discover common ties.

Few tasks are more urgent today than caring for the moral and political health of our democracy. The restitution of the moral vision of the republic is not to be entrusted to political experts. This is a task for common citizens who are vigilant and willing to identify and even sacrifice levels of their personal self-realization in order to serve the common good. Disciplined, ordinary citizens alone can contain the corruptive power of money and the influence of the market within the public sphere, the health care system, educational institutions, and the religious and cultural institutions that give meaning to our lives. Vigilant citizens that support social pluralism and the emergence of multiple voluntary associations can provide alternate social and moral visions, and the impetus for public participation of the sort that can revitalize our public life. My grandmother, who was a Presbyterian, used to tell me that Presbyterian schools used to produce such public-spirited people. I hope she is not right—that we *used* to create and nurture such people.

At the moral level

Dignity, as both task and struggle, calls for a reinterpretation of the substantive content of those moral values at the core of the human rights debate: the values of freedom, equality, and community. From the perspective of human dignity, “freedom” is a more inclusive term than liberty or license. It entails much more than doing as one pleases as long as it does not harm or diminish the freedom of others. Freedom relates to our status as creative agents who have the capacity, and who must assume responsibility, to give direction to our personal and collective life.

This attractive term, “creative agency,” central to my own understanding of human dignity, is problematic. Postmodernists, who, in my interpretation, also define the human as creative agency, have a quite different understanding of what this entails. They interpret human emancipation mainly in aesthetic terms, which in itself is not a problem. But their sense of art is problematic. Art is bereft of any objective reference; it is reduced to the expression of the subjective feelings of the artist. The intention and value of art, if it has an intention or value beyond expressing the feeling of the artist him- or herself, is to allow others to enjoy or feel whatever experience the art object elicits within them. There is no intention of communicating or sharing a binding experience with others.

Morally speaking, the problem is that when the good is seen as the sole product of the agent’s spontaneous freedom and/or original self-expression,

and in the absence of a sense of the given and the objectively prior, morality loses its rootedness in the tradition and wisdom it embodies. A radically subjective and relative morality cannot be taught, does not allow us to engage in moral counseling, and is bereft of standards and guidance. As our choices expand, we are left with nothing of value to choose; and as we are empowered, we have less of a sense of the purpose, limits, and direction of that power. It is like having an Exodus experience but never having something like the Ten Commandments that enable us know what are the minimum requirements of living together and the purpose of life.

Secondly, “social equality” entails something other than homogeneity, uniformity, and sameness. Equality is not simple but complex.¹³ More than having the same, it consists of having that which allows us to be the unique beings we are. Paradoxically, social equality aims at difference. The community’s reason for being is precisely to enable the emergence of that which is distinct within our equal dignity. We celebrate plurality as the natural outcome of our freedom. The more spaces to exercise freedom, the greater and more multiple will be the differences that appear among us. Plurality and difference are what make community possible and rewarding, not to mention interesting and enjoyable. I do believe that what makes life in the city so alluring and attractive, in spite of the crime and creeping commercial ugliness, is the diversity of lifestyles and conceptions of life that one encounters there.

Finally, from the perspective of human dignity, “community” entails more than conformity, adaptation, and self-sacrifice for the common good. Paradoxically, community is for the sake of individuality, in the same way that true individuality entails commitment and sacrifice for the well-being of the whole we belong to and that shapes us. As we mentioned, while it is the community that has the services and resources for us to be all that we can be, community is not a mere means for us, but an intrinsic part of what it means to be human.

The social and national community are central to our sense of identity and dignity; however, we are ultimately bound to a larger community—the world community. In good Augustinian fashion, love of family and friends, while good in itself, must lead to social and national love, and national love and loyalty must lead to international love and bonding. The love and justice experienced at the national level prepares us to contribute to the creation of more just, compassionate, and loving world community structures.

Our capacity to freely enter into covenants of community with people from all over the world models the sense of inclusiveness that is part of God’s covenant with humanity. From the perspective of the Ultimate, universal ties can be stronger than family, social, and national ties. International solidarity, aiming to eliminate dehumanizing poverty, torture, religious, and cultural oppression, at times can and ought to take priority over social and national loyalties. This universal and inclusive vision is part of the genius of the

human rights tradition. Its best representatives are those saints whose politics of compassion are to be advocates for the rights of refugees—people who for religious, political, and/or economic reasons are displaced by their leaders and have no place to call their own. These saints remind us that because we all belong to God, we all have legitimate claims, in spite of the claims of nations, over each other’s space and resources. This is what God’s sovereignty really means.

To conclude, dignity as given and dignity as struggle are two sides of the same coin. We cannot have one without the other. Without having dignity we cannot be dignified, but our being dignified is never our own creation. Dignity is ultimately a gift of God’s grace, of God’s creative freedom and option for us. And like many other expressions of God’s grace, we discover it and unveil its depths within our own historical becoming. It is in the struggle to forward the dignity of others that we have a sense of renewed conversion to God’s purpose and aim for us. It is here that we unveil and have a glimmer of that stuff we call dignity. ☛

NOTES

¹ For a comprehensive and insightful treatment of the topic of human rights and the Roman Catholic Church see David Hollenbach, S.J., *Claims in Conflict: Retrieving and Renewing the Catholic Human Rights Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979). For a Reformed perspective on human rights see All O. Miller, ed., *A Christian Declaration on Human Rights: Theological Studies of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1977).

² John Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

³ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

⁴ Jacques Derrida, “Racism Last Word,” trans. Peggy Kanruf, *Critical Inquiry* 12 (Autumn 1985). Also see “The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils,” *Diacritics* 13 (Fall 1983).

⁵ One of the most insightful treatments of the relationship between love and justice is that of Jon Sobrino, *The True Church and the Poor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1984), 39-63.

⁶ Robert A. Evans and Alice Frazer Evans, *Human Rights: A Dialogue Between the First and Third Worlds* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).

⁷ Ronald Cole-Turner, ed., *Human Cloning: Religious Responses* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).

⁸ Even Karl Barth, who, among the modern theologians is so committed to the notion of sacrificial love that he is highly suspicious of the legitimacy of any claims of self love recognizes that there is a legitimate claim not to be sacrificial to the point of losing one’s identity and of losing oneself in the other. *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, trans. G. W. Bromiley, R. H. Fuller, Harold Knight, and J. K. Reid (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 248-269.

⁹ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). Also see his Multiculturalism and the “Politics of Recognition” (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992). Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

¹⁰ One of the best books dealing with the issue of cultural recognition is Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹¹ For a brief but insightful description of the difference between tolerance and respect see Stephen Carter, *The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivializes Religious Devotion* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 93-94.

¹² Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teachings of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

¹³ For the notion of complex equality I am in debt to Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

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ISMAEL GARCÍA: SPEAKING OF DIGNITY



Why has human dignity become a focus of your work?

It came out of a conversation I had with some Hispanic educators and pastors in Dallas. From their point of view, dignity is the standard by which Hispanics look at the moral life. That idea got me very excited. At first I wasn't sure, but as I kept reviewing the literature being produced by Hispanics both inside and outside the United States I became convinced. So I wrote the book *Dignidad: Ethics Through Hispanic Eyes*.

If dignity is the ethical norm for Hispanics, what are some comparable norms for other groups?

García: In literature from the Asian community, marginality is a dominant concept. With African Americans, of course, discrimination is central. But let me say that dignity, marginality, and discrimination are not the monopoly of Hispanics, Asians, and African Americans. But for a variety of reasons these concepts have become a center

of ethical conversations for these groups.

Can one really be a scholarly, objective ethicist? Isn't ethics activist by its very nature?

It's true, of course, that ethics is easily politicized. You want to take it immediately into the public arena. Yet any good scholarly enterprise should provoke passion and lead to activism. Scholarly objectivity has more to do with the willingness to present with fairness different perspectives within the discipline than a lack of passion or commitment to one's point of view. Most of us involved in scholarly pursuits are activists of some sort or another.

When students leave your classes, can they tell where Ismael García stands on ethical issues?

I don't use the classroom as a consciousness-raising platform. I find that to be self-defeating and frustrating for students. When I teach ethics I teach, first, a body of knowledge so that, second, students will develop competency in understanding ethical arguments, and, third, see why well-intentioned and reasonable people have significant differences in dealing with ethical dilemmas. If they get those three things, they get enough. Then if they ask me personally, I tell them where I stand on issues.

Does the Spanish word “dignidad” differ from the English word “dignity”?

Not much. In English the focus tends to be more on dignity as something possessed by the individual—somehow inhabited within the individual. In Spanish the focus is much more relational. Dignity comes out of conversations and encounters and services. Overall, when Spanish speakers and English speakers sit down and talk about dignity they see much more in common than differences.

How is it related to me saying someone is a “dignified person”?

“Dignified” points to comportment, a way of presenting yourself toward others—an air of dignity. When I use the term “dignity” it is a moral usage, rather than in the sense of aesthetics or etiquette. Dignity means valuing the worth of people as people even though they might not comport themselves in a dignified manner. It has less to do with deserving and more with recognition of our being.

How are human rights related to human dignity?

If human dignity is the idea, human rights are the idea in particular. What is dignity, really? It is giving people recognition—wanting to learn who they are and what they need to flourish. It is giving them rights—freedom to choose religion, free speech, justice. Human rights are the best tools we have to give the term dignity some concreteness and sense of practicality.

Is human dignity a Western concept?

All genuine ethical concepts point to something basic that is widely shared beyond cultures. Movements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America advocate human dignity. There is a sense in which the Western world has coined the terms human dignity and human rights in a clearer fashion. Still, dignity points to something about the universal human condition. Within that universal context, different cultural settings contribute to the specificity of what dignity is and to the specificity of what human rights ought to include.

What’s the opposite of human dignity?

Not lack of dignity, because nobody can ever lose it. The opposite of human dignity is being treated as an instrument—like Aristotle’s description of slaves as animated machines. Or the notion of people who don’t count because of disability, anonymity, or whatever discounts them. The opposite of human dignity is not taking into account the claims and needs of others.

How might that happen in the church?

When a church defines itself theologically or ideologically in such a way that it overemphasizes that which distinguishes itself from others, creating we/they distinctions. Historically we did that with the race issue—members of certain races were not invited to certain churches. We have had cases like that on the basis of class. We have upon occasion over-identified our faith

with a particular culture. Often Jesus got in trouble with his own people because he used people of other races, classes, and cultures as examples of what virtue was. When a sense of nation or society or religion undermines the human response, either within the church or outside it, then you have an example of treating people without dignity.

How do you assess the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights?

Very positively. It is a vision of liberation. Of course, every vision of liberation contains within itself its own limitations so that new generations will look back at it and say, “My goodness, how oppressive that was.” We have to live with that.

Recognizing the basic dignity of another human being seems so fundamental. Why do we fail so often to do it? What’s wrong with us?

Sinfulness. Finitude. We are threatened by differences. We are threatened by people who are different. In our particular social context two things threaten us the most: cultural diversity and poverty. Our culture devalues the poor to the point that we just disregard them. We are fearful of cultural diversity because we have a sense that it will undermine our way of life and our social stability. When we discover that some of these fears are unfounded we do better, but overall sin is extremely strong, and we are very defensive about our weaknesses.

Where does this lack of respect rank on the spectrum of problems facing the world today?

If we have a strong commitment to uphold the dignity of people—politically, economically, morally, culturally—then my claim is that other problems will become less pressing. Human dignity is hard to focus on directly as a problem to be solved, but it is present in all these other problems. In one sense, we affirm dignity not by seeking it directly but by dealing with the other issues.

Can you give an example?

Yes, the most powerless and poor members of our society are children. We don’t deal with the dignity of children directly; but if we provide for them the educational means to become the adults they ought to become, the political means for them to learn the art of living within a democratic context, and the resources they need to develop healthy bodies and sound minds, then we are dealing with their dignity directly.

Some examples of the lack of human dignity are well known—racial prejudice, sexism, and others. Are there overlooked cases?

Ironically, I think that lack of care for the non-human world, the environment, somehow violates the dignity of the human. I do still have difficulties understanding what the “dignity” of nature is. I’m very anthropocentric in my understanding of dignity. We must sustain the environment—the environment

is good, and we're accountable for nature's well-being. Nature does not have human dignity, but our dignity depends to some extent on our stepping up to care for the natural world.

It's easy to understand major abuses of human dignity. What are the everyday, garden variety abuses of human dignity?

It's when we lose the capacity to recognize the needs, pains, and joys of the people we live with. Life gets busy. We take our loved ones for granted. Crisis comes. We stop listening—we hear people but don't pay attention to what they are saying. Children tell us what they need but we don't listen. Deadlines, not people, fill our work.

Historically, who are the great heroes of human dignity?

I think immediately of three people. First, Jesus. Jesus was stunning in his sensitivity to people who were marginal and oppressed. When Jesus spoke about the poor he was speaking of people who were not morally nice, were not socially graceful, and were actually unpleasant to be with. Still Jesus called us to love awful people, like Zaccheus.

Second, Ghandi. Ghandi, both in South Africa and India, showed tremendous passion to work for justice in a way that uplifts not only the dignity of others but his own sense of dignity.

Third, Martin Luther King and his capacity to deal with race relationships. Though King was flawed in terms of gender relationships, he had a vision of how to reunite those who had defined themselves as separate and enemies. His was an inclusive vision. He tried to promote Hispanic participation in the Civil Rights movement while many of the other African American leaders were against it. He promoted justice for Vietnamese people when other people thought that it might be detrimental to his own cause.

But most important are the millions of anonymous saints whose works of love in both small and large ways keep the human race together.

What are the signs that a local church is not paying enough attention to human dignity?

Reinhold Niebuhr used to argue that individuals have greater moral capacity than institutions. Institutions, in principle, tend to waft toward the immoral as a way of surviving and asserting themselves. Although he wrote little about the church, I think there are hints in a couple of his works that if there is an institution that might be morally redeemable, it could be the church. I am troubled in particular by churches that withdraw themselves into enclaves in which all the people are more or less the same. Even when such churches do outreach programs, they keep the people they do outreach for at a distance. Most of our churches are very homogenous. In the long term one has to wonder what happens when we keep on dividing ourselves along this line. It is okay to have cultural identity but it is dangerous to *only* have cultural identity.

How can a pastor preach or teach about these issues?

It's not complicated. The Bible is full of stories about lifting somebody who has been put down. It seems hard to miss. Yet we do miss it. So maybe there is something to be said for once in a while saying, "You know, this story points to the dignity of so-and-so," or "This story points to the importance of a commitment to human dignity."

How do kids learn about human dignity?

By the way they are treated. The family is the school of human dignity for children. How male and female family members relate teaches kids gender relationships. How the finances of the household are used shows kids who counts and who doesn't count in the world. I'm seriously troubled by the current phenomenon of kids killing kids. Deep down we all know that one reason why these kids feel like that is that they feel nobody cares about them. They feel no sense of being accountable themselves because nobody seems accountable to them. We must revisit the question of what signals we give our children in terms of our priorities and investments.

When you look at American culture are you optimistic that we are moving in the right direction?

If the options are between being optimistic and pessimistic then I'm optimistic. It is intrinsic to our religious traditions. North Americans are concerned with justice. People understand justice differently. Some people have limited views of what justice is, but few disregard it altogether.

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H. TRISTRAM ENGELHARDT, JR.

Ismael García effectively presents the heuristically rich allure of the term “dignity,” the confusions it involves, and the temptations it offers. As he notes, the Declaration of Human Rights (1948) proclaimed a cento of forbearance rights, procedural protections, and welfare claims.¹ Unconstrained by philosophical discipline, economic obligation, or political responsibility, the United Nations was not forced to justify the rights claims it announced, determine how they might be supported, or oblige itself to enforce them. The language of human rights took on the force of a manifesto. “Human dignity” was then engaged as a foundation for this plethora of rights, although “human dignity” itself is plural in meaning. The ambiguities run deep. The Latin *dignitas* already comes with a gaggle of meanings in identifying excellence, worth, merit, rank, and office. There are also the ambiguities in the foundation and substance upon which García draws: is dignity innate to humans, given to humans, a historical task to be achieved, inalienably equal among humans, or able to be diminished? Likely, different senses of dignity differ in these crucial respects.² Terms have their significance within a particular framework of meaning.

Although ambiguity can nurture poetic force, there are also grounds to clarify important ambiguities. For example, if persons have a right to dignity, against whom do they have this right? By what force and under what circumstances may persons coercively realize their dignity? What constraints should limit the pursuit of dignity? How are dignity concerns to be balanced, as well as harmonized, in the pursuit of other goods? These are questions of considerable weight: the unrestrained pursuit of democracy, rights, and human dignity has led to much bloodshed in this century.³ Because dignity, rights, and equality can function as manifesto terms, words that seem to capture a deep truth and whose criticism is perceived to be out of place, they can both direct and misdirect energy. After the horrors of this century, philosophers as well as political theorists would nevertheless do well to approach with caution passionate but unclear claims of human dignity so as to understand how to mediate peacefully among competing interests.⁴

The foregoing concerns are secular. Orthodox Christian theological hesitations are even more considerable: they disclose spiritual grounds for utilizing caution in the pursuit of personal dignity.⁵ After all, to seek one’s own dignity or the personal dignity of others may be maleficent in encouraging pride. The radical power of Christianity lies not in the discovery of one’s own dignity as a worth independent unto itself. Its power lies in the experience of God’s mercy and love. The focus has not been on achieving one’s dignity, but on the “tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering...[and] love, which is the bond of perfection.” This is affirmed so that God can “rule in your hearts, to which also you were called in one body” (Col. 3:12-15). The dignity of the Christian is achieved in the body of Christ through whom Christians can seek perfection (John 17:23) by being united to his holiness (Heb. 12:10). Even to love one’s neighbor rightly, one must first “love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind,” for “this is the first and greatest commandment” (Matt. 22:27-38).⁶ If one does not first love God wholeheartedly, one’s attempts at love, the achievement of justice, and the realization of human dignity may horribly miscarry, as did many such in this century. It is in the spirit of this insight that one can understand a warning from St. Isaac of Syria (613-?) that is at best troubling, if not scandalous, for the modern ear. “It is better for you to free yourself from the bond of sin than to free slaves from slavery.”⁷

Christ’s revolution is not achieved first by changing the structures of this world, but by first changing the heart through repentance. Christ points to a kingdom that is within us (Luke 17:21) and able to transfigure us, and that will be established in the triumph of his Second Coming (Matt. 16:27). Orthodox Christians understand that Christ does not falsely prophesy when he states, “Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom” (Matt 16:28).⁸ In each of the synoptic Gospels, this prediction is followed by the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, a transfiguration promised to and realized by Christians ever since, as they enter into his kingdom before the Second Coming.⁹ The dignity sought, that leads to transfiguration, depends upon taking on a Christ-like life, which, to the outside observer, may appear far from dignified. “Be persecuted, but persecute not; be crucified, but crucify not; be wronged, but wrong not; be slandered, but slander not. Have clemency, not zeal, with respect to evil. Lay hold of goodness, not justice.”¹⁰ The Christian is to liberate the world and to transform its structure by making mercy have precedence over justice. “Conquer evil men by your gentle kindness, and make zealous men wonder at your goodness. Put the lover of justice to shame by your compassion.”¹¹

Secular concerns about dignity thus graft poorly onto traditional Christianity, which seeks not self-esteem, but repentance and transfiguration. Concerns about dignity are lodged more congenially within secular systems of mutual recognition, which attempt to account for the special standing of indi-

viduals outside of both positive law and transformation by grace. Kant's Enlightenment image of a rational kingdom of ends conveys dignity (*Würde*) on persons out of the respect (*Achtung*) owed to the other from regard of the moral law (*das Gesetz*). Or dignity can be constituted out of the mutual acknowledgement of different persons (*das anerkennende Selbstbewußtsein*), as in Hegel's dialectic of mutual confrontation, which culminates in the fabric of morality.¹² Dignity can be understood in diverse fashions within different attempts to constitute a specific moral understanding of the status of persons derived from the character of morality, reason, or the human condition. History, society, and content shape the multiple traditions of the human search for self-affirmation.

Against this sense of tradition and the search for self-affirmation, Orthodox Christianity stands in contrast. It recognizes tradition not as a complex historical nexus, but as the presence of the Spirit. It invites all to step away from seeking, through others, affirmation of their own intrinsic dignity, but instead to pursue affirmation and dignity in Christ. "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord" (2 Cor. 10:17). For the traditional Christian, a person's standing comes from the free gift of creation and the even more marvelous gift of forgiveness and redemption, despite sinfulness. It comes from God and can only be understood in reference to God. In this fashion, one can indeed acknowledge an appropriate sense of one's dignity as rooted in the love and grace of God. But one must be careful so that secular usages do not decouple a religious understanding from its rootedness in grace. A sense of self-worth apart from this glorying in Christ's love has traditionally been regarded as the first step to sinful pride. In reflecting on how vainglory is the mother of pride, St. John of the Ladder (579-649) warns: "Praises exalt and puff one up; and when the soul is exalted then pride seizes it, lifts it up to heaven and casts it down to the abyss."¹³ This view of matters cannot but go against the grain of modern sentiments, as it did against that of Romans seeking *dignitas*. As Christ reminded Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). ☩

NOTES

¹ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris on December 10, 1948, combined forbearance rights (e.g., rights to life, liberty, and security of person) and procedural rights (e.g., rights to freedom from arbitrary arrest and access to fair and public hearings) with claim rights (e.g., rights to social security and to work). The Declaration does not give sufficient guidance regarding how the latter should be implemented, especially in developing countries with vast differences in standards of living. Even today in countries such as the People's Republic of China, it is quite difficult to realize a general right to social security.

² For a further development of my views regarding the unavoidable strategic ambiguities ingredient in cardinal secular moral terms, see H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., *The Foundations of Bioethics* (New York: Oxford, 1996), 2nd ed., chapter 2.

³ In his criticism of the French Revolution in "Absolute Freedom and Terror," Hegel

explores the dangers involved in the unrestrained pursuit of freedom: "Universal freedom can thus produce neither a positive achievement nor a deed; there is left for it only negative action; it is merely the rage and fury of destruction." *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. James Baillie (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), 2nd ed., 604. Hegel here identifies the bloodshed of the Reign of Terror in France. In the absence of restraining structures, traditions of compromise, and customs that moderate even claims to basic human needs, the pursuit of fairness, justice, and democracy can lead to their opposite, indeed to tyranny and death. Hegel surely would have regarded the tragedies born of the October Revolution, the establishment of communism in the People's Republic of China, and the killing fields of Pol Pot, all of which were undertaken in the pursuit of justice and rights for the oppressed, as flowing, in great measure, from these roots.

⁴ Issues allied to these are explored in H. T. Engelhardt, Jr., "The Foundations of Bioethics and Secular Humanism: Why Is There No Canonical Moral Content?" in *Reading Engelhardt*, eds. B.P. Minogue, G. Palmer-Fernandez, and J.E. Reagan (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997), 259-85.

⁵ My remarks develop from within Orthodox Christianity, which draws on the writings of the undivided Christian theologians of the first millennium as if they were contemporaries, which they indeed are.

⁶ The Pentateuch states the first commandment forcefully. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deu. 6:5). See also Leviticus 19:18.

⁷ Quoted in Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 271.

⁸ See, for example, Homily 66 of the homilies of St. John Chrysostom on the Gospel of St. Matthew.

⁹ See the account of the transfiguration of St. Seraphim of Sarov (1759-1833) when speaking with Motovilov. Lazarus Moore, *St. Seraphim of Sarov* (Blanco, TX: New Sarov Press, 1994), 167-207.

¹⁰ St. Isaac the Syrian, *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, trans. Holy Transfiguration Monastery (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1984), Homily 51, 246.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Homily 64, 314.

¹² Hegel elaborates the development of self-conscious mutual recognition in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, as well as in the third part of *The Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830) and in *The Philosophy of Mind*, §§430-439. The moral force of this analysis is then rendered explicit in *The Philosophy of Right*.

¹³ Saint John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, trans. Lazarus Moore (Boston: Holy Transfiguration Monastery, 1991), rev. ed., 136.

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SHERRON K. GEORGE

Perhaps the greatest problem in our world today is the number of people who have no sense of their own human dignity, coupled by the overwhelming frequency with which people do not recognize the dignity of others and treat them with indignity. The timely relevance of Professor Ismael García's essay is striking.

I would like to respond to Dr. García by commenting on his basic assumptions and methods of ethical discourse, engaging the modern/post-modern debate with which he teases us, looking beyond to missiological connections, and finally listening for silent voices.

In his introductory comments Professor García unfolds the universal scope of his subject by declaring that "the language of human rights has established itself as the moral language all peoples of the world" recognize as normative. He then affirms that "the foundational concept behind the human rights debate" is "the concept of human dignity." Herein lies García's unique contribution: he offers a fresh, creative lens for reflection and praxis of human rights—human dignity. A third basic assumption is that modernity's emphasis on personal autonomy or the "Enlightenment sense of emancipation and self-realization" is foundational to human rights and dignity because it places individuals and social groups in the role of active, responsible moral agents. About this third assumption I will raise some questions.

Professor García's methodological explications are quite insightful. First, he demonstrates the duality or dialectical nature of human dignity which is both divine gift and historical project or human struggle. Furthermore, he presents a circular mode of hermeneutics in which dignity is concurrently motivation, empowerment, and goal. García's familiarity with the language and methodology of liberation theology is evident.

Another dialectical thread which is woven throughout the article is basic to its content. Is the concept of human rights focused on the rights, dignity, and treatment of others or is it directed more towards self, one's own rights, and achieving one's human dignity? In laying out his initial assumptions, Dr. García speaks of human rights as "defining how humans ought to be treat-

ed." Is that how others should treat me or how I should treat others? In the ideals and development of the Enlightenment project which he espouses, the dangers of self-interest, self-centeredness, and excessive individualism are ever lurking.¹ While García plays with the dangerous fire of laissez faire individualism, he doesn't seem to get burned, for he insists that both one's own dignity and that of others are essential, and that our social life is "constitutive of the dignity of persons." Rather than allowing preoccupation only with personal rights and dignity, he calls us to focus on the "rights of persons in community" and to become a "community of mutual dependence." This dialectical approach assumes that autonomy and individualism do not imply narcissistic independence. Not only does human dignity implicate our recognition and treatment of others, but one's self-realization and dignity "is intrinsically tied with the practice of serving and contributing to the life possibilities of others."

After emphasizing the dignity of the "other," Professor García returns to the slippery dialectic when speaking of "our right to seek our physical well-being" and "to contribute to the physical well-being of others." Perhaps his point is that we cannot treat others with dignity unless we have dignity, but what seems to be unsaid is that having dignity does not guarantee that we treat others with dignity, as experience and history painfully demonstrate. He pushes the argument to the limits when he invokes Karl Barth to urge us to "be firm in the pursuit of our own self-care and resist being made mere instruments for the well-being of others." But immediately García tempers the call to self-love by saying "it is best to start by giving priority to the needs of others." Then a kind of synthesis comes when he affirms that "[O]ur sense of dignity as well as our self-realization and emancipation is tied to that of others" and that "[T]he paradox of authenticity is that we obtain it not by pursuing it directly but as the by-product of serving the needs of others."

This summary of Dr. García's self/others dialectical brings us to the modern/postmodern debate which he raises. While recognizing truths in numerous postmodern critiques of modernity, he claims that the postmodern moral language of obligation "has a strong paternalistic bent to it." What about the paternalism in modernity's language of progress, expansionism, and superiority? Isn't "charity" as much a part of the modern projects of development and mission as of postmodern moral obligations? Did not many people and nations become "passive recipients of other people's graces" in modernism?

The Enlightenment's understanding of autonomy and freedom molded America's vision of Manifest Destiny and mission in which, according to Roger G. Betsworth, "America had a responsibility to enable all nations to gain freedom . . . to establish democracy throughout the world . . . to teach inferior peoples the ways of Christian America."² How much of our policy of foreign aid and intervention reflects narrow self-interest? Has the "generous accountability" of the non-poor, which García advocates, succeeded in transforming complexes of superiority and inferiority? Do we desire self-determi-

nation for nations which do not choose models we espouse? Has the modern project led to “moral solidarity” with countries like Cuba? Has the Enlightenment sense of rights curtailed “the inclination of the non-poor to treat marginalized people as mere victims?” A part of the richness of Ismael García’s essay is that it elicits such questions and dialogue. Unquestionably human rights and dignity are positive developments of modern culture’s “autonomous individual,” but together with Robert Bellah and Lesslie Newbigin,³ I am skeptical about some of modernity’s marks on our individualistic and ethnocentric culture.

While Dr. García’s theological location of human dignity in creation *imago Dei*, incarnation, and redemption are notable contributions of his essay, I question the theological validity of the modern notion of autonomy. Modernity’s concept of autonomy diverges from the neotestamental concept of freedom couched within the framework of *douloi*, slaves or servants, ideas foreign to American individual autonomy.

Though I differ with my colleague on the concept and emphasis on autonomy, I applaud his final movement to “redefine” modernism in terms of global mutuality and solidarity. Robert J. Schreiter affirms that the church’s missionary activity has gone through three phases: The Period of Expansion (1492-1945) of European civilization by invasion and conquest; The Period of Solidarity (1945-1989) in the bipolar world of the Cold War where mission became dialogue, inculturation, and liberation; and The Period of Globalization (1989-) of markets, communication technology, and mission.⁴ While I think we are still learning the praxis of solidarity, we have entered a new era of globalization in church and mission. Moving beyond the boundaries of modernity, Professor García affirms that “what is ultimately at stake is . . . the status of membership within the national and world community” and reaches a crescendo with the call to “freely enter into covenants of community with people from all over the world.” Ethicist and missiologist meet when he soars beyond ethnocentrism and evokes “universal ties” and “international solidarity” in a global community.

My final remark is in relation to the voices heard and not heard in Dr. García’s essay. He demonstrates how Western culture’s understanding of dignity “links humankind with God.” If human rights and dignity are universal, how do non-Western voices explain dignity? We are celebrating the anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, but I wonder to what extent is our hermeneutic of human rights culture-bound.

As a liberationist, García recognizes that the historical struggle for human dignity is heard “in the voice of disenfranchised people and nations.” Do the voices of “those whom our society has created poor and oppressed” find expression in his scholarly presentation? With perception and sensitivity, Professor García speaks about “the uniqueness of our group identity.” Does his unique Hispanic identity come through as it does so powerfully in his latest book, *Dignidad: Ethics Through Hispanic Eyes*?⁵

Our dialogue will continue, but one thing is clear, the Realm of God is manifest when we practice what we learn from Ismael García about human dignity. ☩

NOTES

¹ Robert N. Bellah and his team graphically describe the results of self-reliance and moral individualism in American culture and life in *Habits of the Heart* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).

² Roger G. Betsworth, *Social Ethics: An Examination of American Moral Traditions*. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 112, 113.

³ In *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), Lesslie Newbigin discusses at length the Enlightenment concept of “human rights” as “the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (26) and questions the subjective and infinite claims of every human to the pursuit of happiness.

⁴ Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 122-127.

⁵ Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 1997.

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PAUL J. WADELL

When reading Professor Ismael García's essay "On Human Dignity," I was reminded of a scene in John Steinbeck's great novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. It is the one in which the Rev. Jim Casy, the fallen and reluctant preacher, reminisces about the time that he, like Jesus, went out to the wilderness to pray. Alone at night, looking up at the stars, he has an insight that changes his life:

"An' I got thinkin', on'y it wasn't thinkin', it was deeper down than thinkin'. I got thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankin' was holy when it was one thing. An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run off his own way, kickin' an' draggin' an' fightin'. Fella like that bust the holiness. But when they're all workin' together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang—that's right, that's holy."¹

So many things "bust the holiness": the tentacles of selfishness, the seductions of power, the lure of indifference. This is precisely why, as Professor García eloquently demonstrates, that although human dignity, the bedrock of human rights and of the claims and obligations of justice, may be divinely bestowed, it is, sadly enough, an endless struggle to achieve. Steinbeck is right that it only takes one unjust person to make a mess of things. But what happens when the fundamental structures, institutions, and powers of society together conspire to diminish the solidarity necessary for justice and to make appeals to the common good sound utopian and quaint? More pointedly, what happens to the calls of Cornell West and Professor García for a "politics of compassion" when the reigning narrative of a dominant culture blinds us to the image of God in precisely the ones whose sufferings are a protest against the despicable sins of injustice?

The endless, and sometimes seemingly futile, struggle to ensure the rights and to respect the dignity of every human being can only succeed when we realize that injustice is essentially a *betrayal*, an act of infidelity to those who are not alien or stranger or enemy to us, but, as Pope John XXIII said nearly

forty years ago in his social encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, "members of one and the same household."² Realizing this basic and inescapable truth of our human nature, as history tragically attests, is not a natural aptitude, but a difficult and rare moral achievement which demands unlearning habits and attitudes that sabotage solidarity and cultivating those attitudes and virtues which encourage it. Still, before that difficult reshaping of the self can even begin, we must examine carefully the vision or perspective out of which we see (or fail to see) all God's creatures, human as well as nonhuman, not only as blessed, but truly as our neighbors. In short, acknowledging the dignity and safeguarding the rights of all of creation is initially, and perhaps even primarily, a challenge of the moral imagination.

No one has written more insightfully on this than the English philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. As she steadfastly demonstrates, seeing truthfully involves a lot more than just opening our eyes. Given our deep tendencies toward distortion and deception, given our innate skills in falsifying and fabricating, it is no wonder that the dignity and sacredness of every human being is not only often hidden to us, but something we sometimes actively work to conceal. As Murdoch explains, we prefer fantasy to the truth and fantasy, which she describes as "the proliferation of blinding self-centered aims and images,"³ can rule not only individuals, but also our cultural, political, economic, and religious institutions.

Take, for example, the seemingly indisputable claim that "every human being is a person." On face value few would contest this, but the manipulative and self-serving energies of fantasy—whether expressed in the ideologies of racism and sexism, the ideologies of consumerism and materialism, the ideologies of power and domination, or in our endless fascination with violence—show how easy it is to live as if some human beings are persons but the vast majority are not. To see every human being as a person, a true child of God who is to be loved and cared for, is not something we naturally perceive; rather, it is the work of a keen and disciplined moral imagination characterized by reverence, respect, humility, and awe. Yet, to lack such vision makes all the difference, because once we no longer see other human beings or groups, *precisely in their otherness*, as persons having dignity and rights, we have implicitly decided that we owe them nothing, that they are not to be counted in our calculations of justice, and that indeed as *nonpersons* they are expendable.

In short, one of the reasons that the struggle for justice and human rights often seems doomed is precisely because we have fashioned attitudes, practices, behaviors, and policies which encourage us *not to see*. Unless we work to overcome this moral and spiritual blindness, the disenfranchised of the earth will continue to be crushed, perennial victims of our costly self-deception, precisely because how we will act in a situation largely depends on what we are capable of seeing. There is an intrinsic and inescapable connection between truthful seeing and virtuous actions, between a keen and insightful

moral imagination and justice. If our vision is distorted by the darkness of fantasy, our behavior, however unintentional, will not only miss the mark, but do harm. As Murdoch comments, “I can only choose within the world I can see,”⁴ and this means if our vision is skewed by anxiety, self-centeredness, prejudice, greed, or arrogance, our actions will harm rather than bless. As Craig Dykstra writes, “To act fittingly and responsibly is to act in response to truthful seeing, a seeing that peers into the mysterious depths of the world and requires long discipline, patient effort, and the continuous shaping of the whole self by what is real.”⁵

The sinful contradiction between the ontological truth of human dignity and the existential fact of poverty, unemployment, homelessness, and violence suffered by the majority of the world’s peoples can only be overcome when individuals and groups commit themselves to cultivating a moral and spiritual vision capable of justice. We must *see* differently in order to *act* differently, but where do we learn this more adequate vision? How *together* do we learn to see anew? Ultimately, I think, it is an ecclesiological question and thus a task and challenge for the church. This is not easy to claim since the churches themselves are so regularly captive to the reigning fantasies of our times, as well as to illusions uniquely their own. Nonetheless, the kind of deep commitment to human dignity and rights Professor García calls for is impossible without a context or setting in which the attitudes, practices, and habits necessary for a new way of seeing and being can be learned. Despite their flaws and failures, for Christians the most fitting place for this to occur is within the liturgical life of the churches.

In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch argues that “moral improvement involves a progressive destruction of false images.”⁶ The false images which frustrate justice, fracture community, and destroy lives are manifold. What is required are images, symbols, metaphors, and narratives powerful enough to break through the distortions and falsehoods of fantasy so we can see truthfully and live responsibly. They must be stunning enough to disorient us from our usual patterns of perception so that our whole way of seeing can be transformed. An adequate moral imagination does not console but disrupt; it does not endorse our normal ways of seeing, but overturns them. In other words, a revolution in vision is prior to, and necessary for, a life of justice.

This ought to be one of the ongoing effects of the worship and prayer of the church. For instance, to listen to the Scriptures is to be initiated into the narratives of Israel and of Jesus; it is to be brought into a world which, as George Lindbeck says, ought to supply “the interpretative framework within which believers seek to live their lives and understand reality.”⁷ Put differently, we are not to have our moral imagination governed by the distorting ideologies of our culture, but by the illuminating power of the Gospels. We are not only called to see ourselves *in* the narratives of Israel and Jesus, but, more pointedly, to see the world *through* them.

How we learn to see makes all the difference. For instance, if our vision is shaped by the narrative of consumerism, we learn that identity and liberation and fulfillment hinge on ownership, wealth, and constant novelty. But if our vision is guided by the gospel we learn, as Professor García emphasizes, that identity, freedom, and fulfillment come to us through generosity, service, and sometimes even sacrifice. Thus, what makes the church’s liturgy such a dangerous ritual is precisely its challenge to the moral imagination. It is there that we are collectively confronted with the stories, metaphors, images, and symbols powerful enough to pry us free from the more dangerous fantasies of our world and to imbue in us a moral and spiritual vision capable of justice.⁸

“We was one thing. An’ that one thing was holy.”⁹ In his own pithy way, Rev. Jim Casy captures the moral vision we must work to cultivate and retrieve if the gap between the truth of human dignity and its universal realization is to be closed. As Professor García notes, that vision enacted is our commitment to link our lives to the ongoing mission of the church, namely, to be active participants in building and fashioning the reign of God, particularly by seeking justice for the poor and oppressed. But this commitment begins in and grows from the worship and prayer of the church, and that is why respecting human dignity and honoring human rights is ultimately a matter of learning to see and to live eucharistically. ☩

NOTES

¹John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (New York: Penguin Books, 1939), 88.

²John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* 157, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, eds. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

³Iris Murdoch, “On ‘God’ and ‘Good,’” in *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 67.

⁴Iris Murdoch, “The Idea of Perfection,” in *The Sovereignty of Good*, 37.

⁵Craig Dykstra, *Vision and Character: A Christian Educator’s Alternative to Kohlberg* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 61.

⁶Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Press, 1992), 317.

⁷George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 117.

⁸For a fuller development of this theme see Paul J. Wadell, “What Do All Those Masses Do for Us? Reflections on the Christian Moral Life and the Eucharist” in *Living No Longer for Ourselves: Liturgy and Justice in the Nineties*, Kathleen Hughes and Mark R. Francis, eds. (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 153-169.

⁹*The Grapes of Wrath*, 88.

ON HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

JAMES C. GOODLOE

How does the concept of human dignity relate to the Christian church in general and to the ministry of the local congregation in particular? Can it serve as a theological principle to guide or affect the everyday ministry of the pastor or the mutual ministries of the members of the church? How can or should it affect the way people relate to each other? How can or should it affect the mission of the local church to people outside or beyond the church? At first glance, such questions appear easy. Who could be against human dignity? But a close reading of Professor Ismael García's inaugural address, "On Human Dignity," complicates the matter tremendously.

On the face of it, it would seem obvious that the church would want both to acknowledge and to encourage human dignity, both to recognize and to teach it, to uphold and to seek it. It would seem obvious that the church would want to treat its members and its neighbors with respect and common human decency. Of course we would want to do all that, and much more. And therein lies the question. As we look at this particular project on human dignity, as we look at this particular program and proposal and attempt to consider how and whether it might be of use or help in the local church, we must raise certain questions: On what grounds would this concept of dignity be introduced? For what purpose would it be promoted? To what end or effect would it tend? How would it relate to the gospel? Would it be helpful or not to the cause of Jesus Christ?

García begins his address with the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. He rejoices that "the language of human rights has established itself as the moral language of all peoples of the world," though one would have to ask whether all peoples have a moral language and, if so, whether they use this one. Moreover, García regards "the fact that the language of human rights," as "normative for defining how humans ought to be treated, is a momentous historical achievement, and one worth celebrating." That is his starting point. He does not begin with

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Scripture. He does not begin with the Christian faith. He does not begin with our theological heritage. He does not begin with the life of the church. He begins with the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. That is what he celebrates. And that tells us something from the beginning. This entire project rests upon thoroughly secular and political concepts.

I do not recall the language of human rights forming a significant part of the scriptural witness or of the theological heritage of the Reformed church. Nor do I recall that it is the business of the church to be celebrating human historical achievements. I do remember that God has given us a number of commandments which we are expected to obey. I do remember that God has given us a number of promises, the fulfillment of which we receive as gifts (not as rights which we can demand). And I do remember that God has given us a Son who suffered and died and was raised again in order that we might be forgiven and live, which is to say that God has accomplished for us that which we could not and cannot accomplish for ourselves. The language of rights and achievements is not helpful in the church. In fact, it is less than not helpful. It is destructive and misleading. We live by grace alone.

García next turns to a discussion of human dignity, which he takes to be "the foundational concept" behind the discussion of human rights. That is, his interest in human dignity is as a prop to advance the overriding cause of human rights. The better we understand and promote this underlying dignity, he seems to be saying, the more prevalent and secure said rights will be. Again, who could be against human dignity? But, we have to ask, what is the source, the origin, the meaning, and the significance of this term? Why should we import an alien concept into the church, especially when the whole aim of the secular language is to define reality apart from any reference to the God and Father of Jesus Christ and apart from any Christian language of the church?

I do not recall the language of human dignity, either, forming a significant part of the scriptural witness or of the theological heritage of the Reformed church (there is that passage in Habakkuk 1:5-11 about the "dignity" of the dread Chaldean warriors who come for violence and whose own might is their god, but presumably it is not that dignity about which García speaks). In fact, a great deal of our history might be understood to have to do with the lack of human dignity, the failure of human dignity overreaching itself into pride, the failure of human dignity wasting away into sloth and avarice, and so forth. Perhaps the Fall should be understood as the loss of dignity. And then the gospel would have to do with what God does for us in this regard, not something that we have in ourselves or do for ourselves. It is not that we are opposed to human dignity. It is just that the whole current language of human rights and human dignity is an attempt to say that human beings have value in and of themselves, apart from any reference to God. In truth, human beings have value because God values us. This makes all the difference in the world. Many others have already noted that, apart from God,

human beings have no value; that is the language of human rights and human dignity is a desperate and failing attempt to do something it cannot do: shore up the value of human life without reference to God who is beyond human life. So, why would the church want to bring into the church and use such language and concepts which are intended to belittle and to destroy the faith of the church?

Perhaps some examples would be helpful. García heralds dignity as “a radically egalitarian concept.” This suggests that its value should be immediately obvious to all of us. But why is this so? It may be so, not because of our religious heritage, but because the current, prevailing political ideologies say it is so. The Bible says that men and women were made in the image of God, and it also acknowledges that we have widely varying abilities and responsibilities, according to the gifts of God. The Westminster Confession of Faith and the catechisms teach our duties toward superiors and inferiors. That sounds strange to our modern ears. But that is precisely because radical equality is, in many ways, a modern idea. This is not to say that it is right or wrong. But it is to say that it is not a necessary component of the Christian faith, even if we regard it as an attractive part of our own Christian faith. Manifestly faithful forms of Christianity have existed with no reference to, no thought of, and no accommodation for, radical egalitarianism. The point is, the concept of dignity which García promotes is not inherent to the Christian faith. So then, we have to ask, why import such a concept into the church? By bringing in the predispositions of current, prevailing political ideologies, it runs the risk of tearing down the faith and of forfeiting the ability and responsibility to critique the ideologies of the surrounding culture.

In his discussion of dignity as both gift and task, García presents dignity as both the motivating cause of the struggle against oppression and as the goal and purpose of those struggles. I am sure this is historically correct for many situations. But what does it have to do with the church? That is, are we not motivated by the grace of God as our starting point and by the glory of God as our goal? Why would we want any other? Why would we want something less, even if it were good in and of itself? The church today, in its eagerness not to offend, often adopts as its greatest purpose some good deed against which no person of good will could possibly object. But then, what do you have? A church, unwilling to proclaim the gospel or at best unsure about how to proceed, instead busies itself with such projects as building houses for the homeless. It is good to build houses for the homeless. But, as David Wright has warned us, we must beware the good becoming the enemy of the best.

Just as García uses the concept of human dignity to prop up the language of human rights, so does he turn to the Christian faith to prop up what he has already decided human dignity to be. One might wish that he would start with Scripture and move forward, but that is not what has happened here. Looking back in this way has resulted in some strange observations. For

instance, García writes: “Our intelligence, memory, imagination, freedom, and the capacity to transform our social and natural world are signs of our being creative agents that share in God’s image and likeness.” This is important to his project, since he has already decided that human dignity involves our being creative agents. But it is not true to the creation story, which portrays clearly that God is the Creator and we are not. It is not true to the rest of Scripture, which understands that God is God and we are not, and that God’s thoughts and ways are high above our thoughts and ways. It is not true to the Reformed heritage of the Christian faith, which has emphasized the majesty and sovereignty of God and has understood the radical distinction between God and humanity. This problem emerges again in the section on redemption when García writes about humans containing a portion of the “substance of the divine.” To be made in God’s image is one thing. I know of no part of our heritage which would remotely suggest that we contain some part of God. To appeal to such as a basis for human dignity is to confuse and debase Christian belief.

The problem of García’s turning to Scripture and theology to support what he already believes comes up again in his discussion of the Trinity. The most he can get out of this is that we are “created to live in relationship with others and with nature.” Why would he not want to say the most important thing of all, that we were created to live in relationship with God?! Surely this would be our greatest dignity, and he ignores it altogether. Why? Because his program is political, not theological.

Under his treatment of the incarnation, García writes of our “contributing to the coming of the promised kingdom” and of “the product of our steadfast service.” Does he not understand that the kingdom is God’s gift, not our accomplishment? Apparently not. When he starts with the celebration of human achievement, this is where it leads.

Another way of expressing my concern about this project is to raise the question of reductionism. What the Christian faith and church have to say about human beings cannot be reduced to secular, political language about human rights and human dignity. There is more to it than that. There is a great struggle going on about how to understand what it means to be human. And if we capitulate, if we give up our own vocabulary to use that of our opponents, then we have cooperated in and become partly responsible for our own demise. Christianity would become no more than a prop for the current, prevailing political ideology. Even if that ideology happened to be a very good one, in and of itself, becoming a mere prop for it would be a terrible loss for Christianity.

As García continues, Christianity is further relegated to being a secondary prop. He writes, “The language of human rights has helped us *the most* in expressing what we value in humanity and, thus, in defining what human dignity is” (emphasis added). Here is explicit endorsement of the political origin and nature of this program. He does not regard the Christian faith as a pri-

mary source for our understanding of human nature, value, purpose, or dignity. Instead, he regards the secular language of human rights to be of the greatest value.

Perhaps a few more examples would be helpful. García writes that travelling missionaries with slide shows about starving people are effective in raising money from churches because such shows generate a sense of violation of basic human dignity. I certainly hope that this is not the case. I do not believe that it is the case. Instead, I think that people give to feed the hungry because they know that to do so is an act of love and of direct obedience to the commands of Jesus Christ. I think that people give to support the mission of the church because they believe that God wants them to do so. I think that people in the church give because the suffering witness of Christ on the cross compels them to do so. I simply cannot recall, nor can I imagine, any effective missionary appeal being based simply on some notion of maintaining human dignity. That makes no sense at all. Some secular, United Nations appeal might take that approach, but not a Christian missionary. And any effectiveness of such a United Nations appeal might depend less upon its explicit basis than upon vestiges of the influence of the Christian faith upon society and the people to whom the appeal is being made.

It is less than helpful that García frequently introduces and even repeats terms that obviously have some value and meaning to him but for which he fails to provide any definition or rationale. In the midst of this discourse on human dignity and rights, we suddenly hear about “self-esteem,” “autonomy,” “authenticity,” “identity,” “originality,” “communal self-realization,” “plurality,” and so forth. What do these apparently valuable, presumably psychological or sociological, but undefined terms have to do with a Christian understanding of human dignity? What would importing them into Christian discourse do to that discourse? Why, two-thirds of the way through, does García introduce and then drop the term “the dignity of God,” which may or may not be useful to the project of filling out our understanding of human dignity?

As a final example of the elevation of political interests over theological ones, consider García’s odd truncation of Augustine’s thought precisely while appealing to his name for some authority: “In good Augustinian fashion, love of family and friends while good in themselves must lead to social and national love, and national love and loyalty must lead to international love and bonding.” Set aside the question of whether “international love and bonding” are even possible. The point is that Augustine encouraged us to look beyond life in this earthly realm and to seek our true life and citizenship in the City of God. To stop at any point along the way and to love inordinately any part of the created order, even the whole world, instead of using it as a sign to point us toward the one God whom alone we are to love and to enjoy, would be an abysmal failure, sin, and—if not corrected—death.

I would suggest to Professor García that human nature, and therefore any sense of human value and dignity, might be articulated better through a clas-

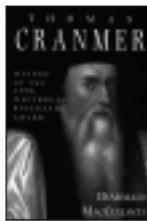
sical Christian understanding that human beings are created and therefore finite and limited; are created in the image of God and therefore self-conscious and transcendent; are fallen and therefore self-interested and flawed; and are redeemed by Christ and therefore have good hope for the future. This would be an attempt to understand human beings through the language of the faith, not through secular language committed to the elimination of faith.

So, how does this concept of human dignity relate to the Christian church in general and to the ministry of the local congregation in particular? Not very well. Can it serve as a theological principle to guide or affect the everyday ministry of the pastor or the mutual ministries of the members of the church? Not without undermining those very ministries. How can or should it affect the way people relate to each other? How can or should it affect the mission of the local church to people outside or beyond the church? At first glance, such questions appear easy. Who could be against human dignity? It would seem obvious that the church would want both to acknowledge and to encourage human dignity, both to recognize and to teach it, to uphold it and to seek it. It would seem obvious that the church would want to treat its members and its neighbors with respect and common human decency. Of course we want to treat each other with respect. Of course we want to love our neighbors. Of course we want to seek and to work for greater justice in the world. Of course we would want to do all that, and much more. And therein lies the question.

As we look at this particular project on human dignity, as we look at this particular program and proposal, and as we attempt to consider how and whether it might be of use or help in the local church, we must raise certain questions: On what grounds would this concept of dignity be introduced? On the secular grounds of human rights. For what purpose would it be promoted? For the political securing of those rights. To what end or effect would it tend? To the elimination of the language of the Christian faith. How would it relate to the gospel? By reductionism and replacement. Would it be helpful to the cause of Jesus Christ? Hardly. Professor García’s “On Human Dignity” is found to be lacking in theological usefulness to the Christian church. ☛

Diarmaid MacCulloch, THOMAS CRANMER.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996, 704 pages, 40 illustrations, \$18. *Reviewed by Michael Jinkins, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology, Austin Seminary.*



No biography of a sixteenth-century Protestant reformer has ever received more critical acclaim than MacCulloch's Thomas Cranmer—and deservedly so. Winner of the 1996 Whitbread Biography Award, the 1996 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Biography, and the 1996 Duff Cooper Prize, this magnificent and meticulously researched historical study, now in paperback, makes the most enigmatic ecclesiastical leader of the Reformation understandable and even at times admirable. MacCulloch, a fellow of St. Cross College and Lecturer in Church History at Oxford University, draws on an astonishing array of unpublished documents to present a figure far more complex and interesting than one encounters in either G. W. Bromiley [*Thomas Cranmer Theologian* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956)] or Jasper Ridley [*Thomas Cranmer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962)], despite the enduring value of their studies. Cranmer emerges from this biography a flawed and thoroughly human evangelical in whom sectarianism and catholicism, conservatism and radicalism waged war right up to his infamous recantations and famous martyrdom.

In comparison to Cranmer, the great heroes of the Reformed tradition, John Calvin and John Knox, were late to arrive on the Protestant scene. Cranmer, as Archbishop of Canterbury, was well into the task of establishing in Henry VIII's England the Protestant standard for liturgical excellence, while Calvin, still a fledgling reformer, was writing the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

MacCulloch reveals a person whose skills as scholar, pastor, liturgist, editor, and politician were integrated into a

single ecclesiastical animal, a person who earnestly believed that worship should rise above vain, uncomprehending repetitions to a biblical simplicity, as Cranmer himself wrote, "so that the people may always undoubtedly learn something, and may return

home from the churches better instructed in the word of God."

Yet, however great his accomplishments, Cranmer was also a survivor who accommodated himself and his conscience to serve successfully under the reign of one of the most capricious and cruel monarchs in history. In fact, Cranmer survived because his viewpoints coincided with those in power above him, such as Thomas Cromwell, the evangelical politician and for many years Henry's chief advisor. And, he survived partly because he was a moral chameleon, able to justify the torture and execution of Henry's enemies even when they included Cranmer's old and very close friend, Anne Boleyn (and, in time, Cromwell himself). But Cranmer also survived, at least to some degree, because of the character of his Erastianism which was never simply a superficial adoption or endorsement of the religious views of the political leadership, nor merely a nationalistic jingoism, but a deeply held theological conviction that one's highest duty to God lies in absolute subservience and obedience to one's monarch.

Calvin once said that in all of life we have our dealings—our negotiations—with God. Cranmer puts flesh on Calvin's words in the context of the political intrigues of Renaissance Europe. He negotiated the white water of Henry's reign with extraordinary skill, here making use of Hugh Latimer for the Protestant cause, there opposing Stephen Gardiner, the Bishop of Winchester, in one situation making a modest advance for the evangelical cause, in another accommodating the bishops sympathetic to Rome. Even when Henry was at his most paranoid and vicious, as in the

Boleyn crisis, Cranmer refused to give in to toadying. He served his monarch as pastor, calming the fury of a tyrant in the name of Christ, writing a letter to Henry that "urged the King to patience like Job." MacCulloch writes, "Cranmer's negotiation of a frightening and complex situation is a model of pastoral wisdom and courage. Knowing the King as he did, Cranmer also knew the destructive quality of Henry's grief and anger. Yet still he chose to highlight his own esteem for Anne . . . still he left open the question of her guilt. . . . And while steadily holding the King's grief and rage in his sight, he sought to pull Henry back to patience and humility, and to shape that rage so that it did not destroy the gains of the previous three years for the evangelical cause."

MacCulloch also observes the influence Cranmer had on the development of the English language. "The widest aftermath of Cranmer's life and work is to be found in the realm of language and of cultural identity. Cranmer could not have known in 1552 that he was providing a vehicle for English worship which would remain almost unchanged for four hundred years; with his natural modesty and restraint, he might have been appalled by the responsibility if he had known." Like Martin Luther, who translated the Bible into what we now recognize as German and in so doing helped to form a national identity among the disparate Germanic groups, Cranmer shaped the language and linguistic identity of an entire people. "It was the happiest of accidents," writes MacCulloch, "that this ecclesiastical functionary, propelled into high office by the accidents of politics, had a natural feel for English prose."

Cranmer's leadership left a mixed inheritance to the English-speaking church, and this must be recognized: a liturgy which drew the laity into the very heart of a rich vernacular of prayer and praise, and a fierce iconoclasm that vandalized the artistic glory of the medieval Catholic church in Britain; a pragmatism that advanced the cause of

the Protestant Reformation and sheltered two generations of evangelical leadership, and a brutality towards the enemies of the Reformation that can hardly be imagined and cannot be excused. In the end, however, it is Cranmer's liturgical bequest through the **Book of Common Prayer** that remains his greatest legacy. No one has equaled his prayers in English, nor the simplicity and beauty of his formulae for morning and evening prayer. If we can say—as I think we can—that the Lutheran Church has bequeathed to Protestant Christendom a passion for the doctrine of justification, and the Reformed Church, a tradition of preaching, then we must also say that Cranmer's Anglican Church has given us a model for corporate prayer (embodied most profoundly and beautifully in the evensong service) that remains true to the tenets of the Protestant Reformation and returns us to the roots of broadly Catholic spirituality.



Dorothy C. Bass, editor, PRACTICING OUR FAITH: A WAY OF LIFE FOR A SEARCHING PEOPLE.

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1997, 232 pages, \$14.

Reviewed by Terry C. Muck, professor of religion, Austin Seminary.

This book begins by describing the chasm that separates the theory of Christian faith and the cultural context in which we live our everyday lives. In order to connect these two, we need to intentionally build bridges to span the chasm. The authors of this collection of articles have a name for these bridges. They call them spiritual "practices."

What are practices? The authors define them this way: "shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life." Practices are needed today more than ever because of the cultural malaise

we all experience. The authors tick off the standard litany of modern ills—busyness, meaninglessness, fragmentation, and individualism—but identify especially individualism, the loss of community and shared values, as the chief bane of modern living. The twelve practices they recommend are all individual practices that can only be done faithfully in community. They are shared activities.

Thus, from the beginning, this book distinguishes itself from a plethora of spirituality books on the market, most of which cater to the rampant individualism of the day. Instead of individualism being a bugaboo, something to resist, most spirituality books see individualism as a strength. The chief problem, instead of individualism, these books say, is secularism, the loss of the sense of the divine in everyday life. And the sure cure, most modern spirituality books opine, is for us to recognize our unique individuality and train ourselves, using the techniques of spirituality, to make better contact with God.

Bass and company offer a different notion. It is individualism itself which must be resisted by seeing the communal nature of even practices done alone. Here's how their argument plays out in the case of each of the twelve practices (embodiment, hospitality, simplicity, effort, Sabbath, testimony, discernment, community, forgiveness, healing, dying well, and singing) detailed in this book:

In the first place, each of these practices has long been a part of the Christian tradition. These are not new traditions borrowed from the current culture or Eastern religious traditions.

Second, each of these twelve practices, for one reason or another, has fallen on hard times and is in desperate need of revival. The author of each of the twelve chapters does an excellent job of showing why these powerful practices have become enervated.

Third, so powerful are the cultural forces arrayed against each, that individuals can do little, by themselves, to stem the tide. We must see these

practices as shared activities that join the divide between Christian theory and cultural context.

Consider one of the twelve practices, simplicity, for example. From Jesus to early monastics to Anabaptist-inspired groups like Mennonites and Quakers to sixties counter-culturalists, simplicity has a rich and varied history/endorsement in the Christian tradition. However, there is no easy teaching, no foolproof technique to living simply. This complexity, together with the individual's weakness in the face of overwhelming cultural consumerism, means we must discern together as Christian communities ways to live more simply. Individual practices, perhaps, but practiced in the context of community and communal support.

That discernment, another of the twelve practices highlighted in the book, is needed in the exercise of simplicity, points us to another strength of this book—its recognition of the interconnectedness of shared Christian practices. Together the practices (and there are many more than the twelve highlighted here, the authors assert) form a web, a way of living for a searching people.

This book is a welcome relief from the seemingly unrelenting individualism of most spirituality books these days. As one of the authors, L. Gregory Jones, has said in another context, "Much contemporary spirituality is shaped by consumer impulses and captive to a therapeutic culture." By showing us that the morality endorsed by today's secular communities and cultures can best be countered by a morality embodied and incarnated in Christian communities and cultures, the authors of this book not only reflect a cornerstone of gospel truth, but give us hope. 🙏

CHRISTIANITY AND CULTURE



POSTCARDS FROM THE EDGE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND CHURCH GROWTH

SCOTT BLACK JOHNSTON

In recent weeks, I have received some rather intriguing mail. Rejuvenating the tired stream of postal flotsam that regularly fills my mailbox has been a series of upbeat postcards. On the front of these glossy cards, comforting, black and white photos convey images of happy people in contented settings. On an autumn day, a couple walks hand in hand through a park. Surrounded by smiling faces, a young boy blows out five birthday candles. A middle-aged woman sits contemplatively on a tree swing. Flipping a card over, a simply worded invitation beckons: "We are different, come check us out." When my eyes locate the name and a local address, it dawns on me that I have just been asked to attend church. I am curious. Why not?

Scott Black Johnston is associate professor of homiletics at Austin Seminary. He earned the M.Div. from the Divinity School of Yale University and the Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary.

The structure itself is big—larger than the movie theater multiplex in our area. The parking lot has space for thousands of cars. On entering the building, worshipers are welcomed by an information booth staffed by fifteen to twenty people. Around this circular desk, one can find brochures about the numerous study-groups that the church offers, sign up for various sports teams, and be handed a copy of the church's beliefs. I stroll around, waiting for the 11:00 a.m. service to begin, and one thought dominates my musings: this place does children right. I wander by a gorgeous nursery, a worship hall for high school youth decked out with the latest in multi-media equipment, an extensive indoor playground swarmed by toddlers, and finally gaze in awe at a children's worship room complete with a puppet theater/sound stage that would leave Sesame Street fans drooling.

The auditorium that accommodates adult worship seats between three and four thousand people. In front, an expansive stage holds a sixteen-piece band, a thirty-member choir, and eight vocalists with hand-held microphones. On either side of the stage, stadium-sized monitors flash the words to the songs and show live-video images of those singing, praying, and preaching. The auditorium is pleasantly decorated, but devoid of "traditional" Christian symbols. There is no communion table, no cross, and no sign of either a font or a baptismal pool. Glancing around, I see a racially diverse congregation (I'm guessing: 70% Caucasian, 20% Hispanic, 10% African American) with equal numbers of men and women. The average age is quite low, somewhere between 25 and 30. I see no one who looks to be over 70. Most of the people around me are carrying Bibles. The service begins with thirty minutes of singing. Both the band and the vocalists prove to be of high quality. While less than half of the congregation joins in the singing, almost everyone participates by clapping along with the popular rock beat. It feels a lot like a concert. Down in front, two women leave their seats and dance to the music, raising their arms in a revolving posture of praise.

Following the singing, and a time for announcements during which upcoming events are promoted, people with prayer concerns are invited to gather by the stage where other members of the church will be waiting to pray with them. No request, we are told, is too small or too big for Jesus. This sentiment is reflected in the sermon. Blending jokes, "inspirational" stories, and snippets from many different biblical texts, the preacher emphasizes the great rewards (both in this life and the next) to be had by those who trust in Jesus. The preacher claims that his message is based on a text from the book of Job. Whether or not one can actually mine these theological nuggets from Job remains to be seen, because the preacher neither reads from the book of Job nor mentions the plight of the biblical character after this preliminary declaration. The sermon concludes with an altar call, and the service, with more singing.

Heading toward my car, I am impressed by the organization, by the congregation's enthusiasm, and by their approach to children's ministry. I am con-

cerned by the self-centered theology propounded in the music, the prayers, and the preaching. Mostly, however, I wonder if the rumors will prove prophetic? Is it true that the megachurch portends for the local Protestant parish what Home Depot has signaled for the local hardware store? Is the familiar mainline church in imminent danger of being made obsolete?

To process these questions, I place a call to Donald E. Miller. Miller is professor of religion at the University of Southern California and the director of the Center for Religion and Civic Culture. He is also the author of the fascinating study, *Reinventing American Protestantism: Christianity in the New Millennium* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). A trained sociologist, Miller brings scientific rigor to the study of three new paradigm churches in southern California: Calvary Chapel, The Vineyard, and Hope Chapel. His work distinguishes itself from the "gee-whiz" landscape charted by much church growth literature by providing a thorough and often intimate portrait of the megachurch phenomenon. A self-avowed liberal Christian, Miller opts not to engage in either theological or political criticism of this "culturally significant movement"—leaving that task to his readers. Instead, Miller's straightforward prose takes us on a no-holds-barred tour. We attend worship services in city parks and converted warehouses. We eavesdrop on small group discussions, and watch as thousands of youth sway to the live music at a weekly Monday night Bible study. We step into pastors' studies to listen to their theories of ministry and their strategies for church administration. Along the way, a colorful model for the contemporary church begins to emerge. It is a model, Miller laments, "that many mainline denominations have dismissed out of hand."

Such hasty rejections should concern us. For behind the descriptions of exuberant worship, the stories of personal conversion, and the statistics detailing the incredible growth in these churches' membership, Miller sees the advent of a new reformation. If the mainline denominations are going to survive into the 21st century, he argues, they will need to learn from these new paradigm churches. At this point, (I tease him about it; he, laughing, admits it) Miller starts preaching. Having first approached these churches as a sociological marvel, Miller now suggests a theological reason for their success. He puts it this way, "Not only are new paradigm churches doing a better job of responding to the needs of their clientele than are many mainline churches, but—more important—they are successfully mediating the sacred, bringing God to people and conveying the self-transcending and life-changing core of all true religion." The core to which Miller refers is religious experience. "I had an epiphany during the early stages of research," he says, "religion is not fundamentally about beliefs, it is about experience." In Miller's opinion, new paradigm churches provide experiences of the sacred that feel more authentic to contemporary people (especially young people) than the experiences furnished by mainline churches.

Replacing the phone in the carriage, I am divided. Without question,

mainline churches have a lot to learn from new paradigm churches—not the least of which is how to minister to children and how to incorporate contemporary melodies into worship. Still, I cannot help wondering if Miller’s theological analysis is correct. Is it true that new paradigm churches are “mediating” sacred experience in a better way? And, how would you know? If impressive growth in numbers and converts is the primary indication of “authentic” religious experience, then perhaps the most accomplished model for mediating the sacred in North America today belongs to the Church of Latter Day Saints. This is, of course, where it gets tricky. Those with Miller’s theological perspective can rest comfortably with the notion that—in the grand scheme of things—beliefs are not so important, and that the best purveyors of experience will succeed. The rest of us (i.e., mainline Christians, Mormons, and—I suspect—many members of these new paradigm churches) remain vitally concerned about these beliefs. Why? Because they are important. Because the words that we pray, sing, and preach engender different kinds of religious experience and promote different kinds of ethical living.

At the beginning of Dickens’s “A Christmas Carol,” Ebenezer Scrooge wakes from sleep to be confronted by the ghost of his former partner, Marley. This ghostly apparition presents a problem for Scrooge. Is Marley real or not? In Scrooge’s memorable words, “How do I know that you are not an undigested blot of mustard?” Perhaps Scrooge’s stance ought to be adopted by the mainline church. Instead of quickly dismissing new paradigm churches out of fear, or running to embrace them as our salvation, we should carefully evaluate the theological rhetoric that is so closely intertwined with their religious experience. In other words, just exactly what are these people experiencing? Posing this difficult question presupposes that the words and beliefs that surround our sacred experiences matter. For the language and practices of any given Christian community (mainline or new paradigm) provide a picture of the god who is worshiped there. So, are the experiences that Miller describes sponsored by the Holy Spirit or by something considerably more mundane? Marley or mustard? Don’t be too quick to answer.

What Scrooge learned from Marley saved his life. 

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