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THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF DISSENTING PROTESTANTISM TO WESTERN VIEWS OF HUMAN DIGNITY AND FREEDOM

NICHOLAS MILLER¹

I. INTRODUCTION – DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE MODERN WEST

A. Human Dignity and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*

The concept of human dignity has become central to modern systems of civil and religious rights in the western world, indeed in most of the world at large. The centrality of human dignity to systems of rights was enshrined internationally in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations in 1948. In its preamble, that document declares that the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” Later, in Article 1, it states that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” The word “dignity” is used no less than five times throughout the document. A careful reading of the document reveals that the concept of the “equal” dignity “inherent” to or “endowed” in man serves as the central ideological foundation and justification for the rights outlined in the Declaration.

The Declaration was dramatically influential. Not only was it adopted by the UN with no negative votes (48 in favor, 8 abstentions), but it soon became the model for national constitution writing since then. It has been adopted by or influenced most national constitutions written since 1948, and during that time it has become the world’s “most translated document.”² Since then about 200 other documents have been written protecting human rights in the world, and at least 65 of these mention the Universal Declaration in their preambles.³

B. Failure of Dignity and Rights in the Modern World

Thus, the concept of human dignity has become perhaps one of the most widespread, articulated, shared values in the international community. One cannot really find anyone arguing against it, perhaps with the exception of a few post-modern nihilists. And yet as I write this, the US State Department is on the verge of releasing a detailed report of the brutal and coercive “enhanced interrogation” techniques that

¹ Nicholas Miller, PhD, is Director of the International Religious Liberty Institute at Andrews University.

² <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/records-1000/most-translated-document/> (viewed on 8/1/2014).

³ http://ccnmtl.columbia.edu/projects/mmt/udhr/preamble_section_4/discussion_5.html (viewed on 8/1/2014)



the CIA carried out in the war on terror in the years after 9/11. The report, the findings of which were accidentally leaked, details a much more systematic, widespread use of these tactics than previously thought. According to the findings, there is “no doubt that the methods used to extract information from some terrorist suspects caused profound pain, suffering and humiliation. It also leaves no doubt that the harm caused by the use of these techniques outweighed any potential benefit.”⁴

One need not linger on American human rights abuses in the war on terror to know that the concept of human dignity is in trouble in the 21st century. If one of the pillar countries for human rights protections has fallen into this kind of officially sanctioned inhumane behavior, then the situation around much of the world is probably equally as poor and, in some instances, much worse. Indeed, monitoring groups confirm that in the last decade torture has been used by more than 150 countries around the world, including in many instances against political prisoners. Those countries we view as modern strongholds of civil rights are implicated in 20th century torture, including France, England, Germany, Spain, and the United States.⁵

The fact that the American government is preparing a self-critical report of its agency’s actions, however, is not all bad news. It is evidence that American leadership still takes the notion of human rights and dignity as being of some importance. Still, one is left with the sense that while human dignity may be the most widespread international value in theory, it may at the same time be the most widely violated and ignored value in practice.

What has caused this radical disjuncture between ideal and practice? Is there something about the concept of human dignity that is too thin and insubstantial to serve as a robust foundation for rights? Is there a way of connecting concepts of dignity with existing values that people may take with more seriousness, given their apparent disregard of this widespread idea that seems most remembered by its violation?

Some have criticized the notion of human dignity as being too vague and insubstantial a soil to provide firm rooting for ideas about human rights. This critique seems supported by the observed widespread abuse of human rights. But is it possible that our current prevailing conceptions of human dignity are shallower than those that informed the Universal Declaration? Is it possible that there are competing, or at least overlapping, notions of dignity, some of which are thicker and more substantial than others?

C. Competing Ideas of Dignity – Thin and Thick

I want to propose that this is indeed the case. That fully secularized notions of dignity, devoid of metaphysical content or connection, have come to dominate general thinking in legal and political circles when it comes to talking about hu-

⁴ <http://rt.com/usa/176884-leaked-post-911-torture-report/> (viewed on 8/1/2014).

⁵ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/ACT40/001/2003> (viewed on 8/3/2014).



man dignity and rights. These secularized conceptions have come to obscure thicker, deeper conceptions of human dignity flowing out of metaphysical conceptions of human nature and identity.

The Universal Declaration was drafted to be as inclusive as possible as it sought to attract support from all the nations of the world. Because of this desire for inclusivity, it has been claimed that “One of the Declaration’s most remarkable features is its failure to posit a metaphysical foundation—religious or natural law-based—for the ‘inherent dignity’ invoked within its Preamble.”⁶ This is at least a partially true statement. Nowhere in the Declaration is there a mention of God or religion, except as the latter was part of the human identity to be protected.⁷

And yet there are still key terms and phrases in the Declaration that reveal at the very least an implicit metaphysical grounding to the document. The first line about all humans having “inherent dignity” is suggestive of an essentialist construct to human nature that cannot be explained on purely materialistic grounds. Indeed, it has been recognized, I believe rightly so, as a reference to the 18th century metaphysical Enlightenment “doctrine of inherent human rights.”⁸

This sense of universal, metaphysical grounding is heightened by the language in Article 1 that says that all humans are “endowed” with “reason and conscience.” “Endowed” is an active verb that suggests an actor outside the human that places within it these qualities of thought and conviction. This word would seem to provide more than a coincidental connection with the United States’ Declaration of Independence that asserts “all men are created equal and *endowed* by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. . . .”

The word “reason” refers at the least to the human ability to engage with the external reality of natural laws and processes, an idea which contains at least certain metaphysical assumptions. But the word “conscience” has a distinct moral connection that ties it to metaphysically-based views of right and wrong. It has been noted that the Declaration’s notion of conscience contains within it the 18th century Enlightenment notion of epistemic universality. That is, as stated in the preamble, it is the “conscience of mankind”—not just elite experts, or western thinkers—that has

⁶ Jenna Reinbold, “Political Myth and the Sacred Center of Human Rights: The Universal Declaration and the Narrative of ‘Inherent Human Dignity,’” *Hum Rights Rev* (2011) 12:147–171, 150.

⁷ Mary Ann Glendon, in her account of the creation of the Universal Declaration and the role played by Eleanor Roosevelt, quotes Roosevelt as explaining the absence of a reference to God in the Declaration as follows: “Now, I happen to believe that we are born free and equal in dignity and rights because there is a divine Creator, and there is a divine spark in men. But, there were other people around the table who wanted it expressed in such a way that they could think in their particular way about this question, and finally, these words were agreed upon because they... left it to each of us to put in our own reasons, as we say, for that end.” *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York NY: Random House, 2001), 147.

⁸ Johannes Morsink, *Inherent Human Rights: Philosophical Roots of the Universal Declaration* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) 17; Charles Malik was responsible for drafting the Preamble, and it was he who inserted the language about “inherent dignity.” While the concept of dignity was earlier mentioned in the Preamble to the UN Charter, Malik evidently added the word “inherent,” which does not appear in that earlier Preamble. Malik was a very committed Greek Orthodox believer and religious thinker, and it is evident that the word is intended to have metaphysical implications. Glendon, *A World Made New*, 117–118, 125–127.



been outraged by recent barbarous acts.⁹

The above-discussed language in the Declaration that reveals metaphysical assumptions of inherent rights and dignity that are recognized universally by human reason and conscience provides a pathway back to early modern conceptions of human dignity that I believe have a bit more grounding and force than some of our more modern notions. It causes the document to contain within it a transcendent grounding that may have somewhat more bite, or energy, or rhetorical and persuasive power.

II. EARLY MODERN CONCEPTS OF DIGNITY – THREE VIEWS

But belief in the transcendent alone is not sufficient to protect the conception of human dignity or the practice of human rights. The long and sordid history of the Crusades, Inquisitions, and Jihads of the medieval world—all carried out in the name of God, or gods—well illustrates this point. The wrong kind of metaphysical grounding can merely provide higher justification and motive to coerce, abuse, and mistreat fellow humans. I believe that the system of rights referenced by the Declaration, one in rights universally “inherent” in humans, as “endowed” by a Divine being, and that are potentially understood and known by all humanity references a certain strand of human dignity and rights as best expressed, or most widely known, through the thought of English philosopher John Locke.

I have elsewhere written on Locke’s contribution to our modern conception of religious freedom and rights generally and its grounding in a certain strand of dissenting Protestant thought.¹⁰ That work takes on significance in the present context for its insight into the competing conceptions of rights and human dignity with which Locke contended.¹¹ These other conceptions also posited a transcendent realm, overseen by a Creator who had created humans in His image. Yet they resulted in a much more limited conception of rights than Locke advocated. What was the difference between these varying schemes of rights and dignity?

A. Dignity of Paternalism, Stewardship, and Self-Ownership

In short, the answer has to do with the kind of relationship between the individual, the community, and the transcendent. In the late 17th century, three conceptions of the relationship among these elements resulted in three types of human dignity: the dignity of paternalism, seen especially in ideas of the divine right of kings and sacerdotal privilege; the dignity of stewardship, a concept of self-ownership in relation to others, but of God’s ownership in relation to the transcendent; and, the

⁹ Ibid 18.

¹⁰ Nicholas P Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestantism and the Separation of Church and State* (New York NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 63-90.

¹¹ See especially, Ibid 156-168; Also see, Nicholas P Miller, “The Dawn of the Age of Toleration: Samuel Pufendorf and the Road Not Taken,” *Journal of Church and State* 50 (Spring 2008), 255-275; Nicholas P Miller, “Competing Secularisms and the Place of Religious Freedom,” chapter in *Trends of Secularism in a Pluralistic World* (Madrid, Spain: iberoamericana/Vervuert, 2013).



dignity of self-ownership, where the individual, autonomous self is the highest authority in relation to the self. This latter category was only partially developed in the 17th century and awaited fuller expression in the 18th and especially 19th centuries, especially in the philosophy of John Stuart Mill.

The dignity of paternalism is the outlook that dominated the Middle-Ages. It is well expressed in the legal philosophy and writing on human rights by Samuel Puffendorf, the 17th century Lutheran political philosopher. Puffendorf defended a system of human rights and religious liberty, but it was filtered through a conception of the king and religious leaders as being in paternal oversight over their subjects. He conceived of the metaphysical realm being mediated through religious and civil elites to the individual subjects.

This view resulted, despite its language of rights and human dignity, in a system that was inherently paternalistic, both civilly and religiously. Civil and religious rulers, at least those that were Christian, were ultimately responsible to God on behalf of the community; citizens and church members were the beneficiaries of these mediations and were expected to play subservient roles to these elites, civilly, intellectually, and spiritually.

The king was expected to oversee a state religion, in cooperation with bishops and priests, and guard and promote it with the civil laws and force of the state. This view cut across confessional lines and was characteristic not just of Catholic countries, but also of magisterial Protestantism as found in Calvin's Geneva, Luther's Germany, much of Elizabeth's England, and even Puritan New England.

But not all of Protestantism embraced this dignity of paternalism. There was a more individualistic brand of Protestantism, flowing from some of the writings of early Luther and kept alive by the Anabaptists and others in the branch of the radical reformation. As it spread beyond those historically termed "radicals," I term it a strand of dissenting Protestantism, meaning that they dissented from the magisterial Protestants who combined church and state over the individual believer.

Elsewhere I have argued¹² that John Locke, in his views on religious freedom, was influenced by and influenced in return, this dissenting brand of Protestant thought. (He was more influenced than influencer, in my view, though his influence in causing otherwise magisterial Protestants to adopt dissenting Protestant views was very great.) Locke deals at length with the notion of paternalism in government and religion, and he decisively rejects it and substitutes a combination of self-ownership and divine ownership that can best be described as stewardship.¹³

John Locke's most famous political work is arguably his *Second Treatise of*

¹² To some degree of success, I believe, as indicated by various positive reviews of my book *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment* and its argument, including those relating to Locke, in a number of scholarly journals. Ragosta, John, *American Historical Review*, Feb 2013, 177-178; Balmer, Randall, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* (64), 2013, 857-858; Bette Novit Evans, *Journal of Church and State*, June 30, 2013, 570-572.

¹³ S Adam Seagrave. "Self Ownership vs Divine Ownership: A Lockean Solution to a Liberal Democratic Dilemma," *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol 55, No 3, July 2011, 710-723.



Government, which most college students read at one time or another. But most people don't think to ask about the *First Treatise*, which is a much more obscure tract today. It is an extended attack, using Scripture and logical argument, on the notion of patriarchy in government, using as a foil Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha: or the Natural Power of Kings*. Filmer represents a long line of medieval thought that viewed the king as holding paternal authority, derived from Adam, over his subjects. This authority gives him right as king and ruler to the unquestioning obedience of his subjects and oversight over their religious beliefs and practices.

After dismantling Filmer's notions of patriarchy in the *First Treatise*, Locke spends much of the *Second Treatise* replacing Filmer's paternalistic oversight with conceptions of dual ownership, the ownership of the individual as against his or her neighbors and rulers, and the ultimate divine ownership of all persons. This dual ownership concept has caused some confusion, as scholars wonder which Locke really believed—in self-ownership or divine ownership. The apparent conflict is readily resolved once one understands the biblical notion of stewardship. A steward is one to whom property is entrusted, and the steward has the rights of ownership against all other persons, though he or she is responsible ultimately to the owner for the good management of the property.

B. The Dignity of Stewardship

The dignity of stewardship is a profound concept that gives significant freedom in relation to others, but also responsibility in relation to the divine and others that avoids the excesses of paternalism and a hyper-individualism. While one is free in body and soul from the intrusions of others, one has responsibilities to God to treat one's body as well as one's neighbor with appropriate respect and dignity. This stewardly relationship goes beyond a mere "right to be left alone," or a duty to merely leave others unmolested. Stewardship of self implies a responsibility to act with care of oneself, living in a manner to flourish as a human, but also to create conditions where the dignity of others can be realized, all being subject to the same divine oversight and expectation.

The ideal of stewardship means that the political question that comes to us from near the dawn of human time, "Am I my brother's keeper?" is answered with a resounding "yes." But it is a "yes" that recognizes that while I am my brother's keeper, I am not his father or ruler, at least in a manner that would interfere with his own stewardship obligations in this world and beyond. Negative liberties are not enough to fulfill these obligations, leaving persons alone who are struggling with conditions that threaten or impair their human dignity. The steward recognizes a need to help foster conditions where the dignity of all can be realized, though to do it in a way that does not undermine the impetus or motivation of others to exercise their roles as stewards of their persons, property, and liberty.

In opposing this paternalism in *Treatise One*, Locke engages in an extended and



close reading of Scripture to refute Filmer's arguments about Adam and his descendants. These theological disputes seem arcane to us today, and thus the book has faded into obscurity. Yet, wherever there is an authoritarian, paternalistic government, the Locke/Filmer debate is still very much relevant. The paternalism can be a right wing dictatorship, such as we saw in the 20th century with fascism and Nazism.

But this paternalism can also take the form of the statism of left wing communism or oppressive socialism, or even a progressive, social welfare state model that engages in a kind of soft-tyranny of cultivating citizens' dependence on the state, undermining their own sense of stewardship, while imposing its transcendent moral framework upon all. While this soft-tyranny may not yet fully characterize the nations of the west today, one can see sufficient elements of it in government and culture to make a revisit of the Locke/Filmer debates a very relevant exercise.

This soft tyranny also was implicated in another debate that Locke was part of. This argument was with those who would collapse all ownership into self-ownership and either deny or ignore transcendent relationships, rights, and duties. This debate was perhaps in his day less fully developed, as full-fledged arguments about human autonomy in the absence of the divine did not become widespread until later in the 18th and even 19th centuries. Still, men like Pierre Bayle and Baruch Spinoza developed systems of thinking about humanity, its nature, purpose, and liberties, in the absence of knowledge or belief about the Divine, at least as conventionally understood.

Locke's response to these purely secular systems was blunt and succinct: "the taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all."¹⁴ The element of stewardship in his system that created any sort of objective obligations to oneself and others, an external morality, discoverable through reason and experience, was in essence denied by these systems. If all one had was the autonomous, self-defining individual, then the limits of conduct were defined essentially by subjective human desire, except where that desire bumped up against the physical person or desire of

¹⁴ John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration*, edited by Ian Shapiro (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 246. Because of his view that atheism would undermine the validity of both morality and rights, Locke drew the conclusion that atheists should not be tolerated. I believe this was a mistaken conclusion that conflicted with his own premise of the importance of private judgment to religious belief. The reality is that the unbeliever and atheist should have the same freedom as the theist or super-naturalist to make their own judgments about ultimate reality, including a divine realm. The religious believer should extend, by principle, the same right he or she has to make judgments about the existence and details of a divine realm to those who view that realm differently, including those who would deny it. His own right to belief is based on this premise. It is actually the atheist who lacks a principled basis to extend this right of judgment to the believer, as for the atheist all there is, is the material, temporal world. There is simply no justification for deference in law or public policy to a supposed "metaphysical" or "sacred" or "transcendent realm" of values. So the believer may have good reason to argue against the personal and political philosophy of the atheist, to prevent a materialist, imperialist philosophy from defining public life. But that same believer is compelled by his own principles, in my view, to extend toleration to the beliefs and practices of the unbeliever, as long as they do not harm or unfairly impact others. Locke extended such toleration to other kinds of erroneous opinions, as long as they "do not tend to establish domination over others, or civil impunity to the church in which they are taught, there can be no reason they should not be tolerated" (Ibid 246). Had Locke been consistent, this statement would have encompassed atheists as well.



another. While one had a duty not to harm another, and thus invade the autonomy of another, there was no clear basis of a duty to help another, unless one desired to.

Further, if there was no objective measure as to the worth or value of a desire, which is essentially the case if one rejects a belief in the transcendent, then society would lose the ability to objectively adjudicate between conflicting desires. Perhaps the stronger desire should prevail, but how would that be determined except through how many shared that desire? Thus, all values, including ones that had been viewed as transcendent and having objective elements, are transmuted into subjective desires and become subject to standard, majoritarian political processes.

Belief in rights, including the right of religious freedom, would become just another desire that would need to be balanced and traded off with any other desires that persons in society might have. Notions of individual rights might be paid lip-service in light of the strong western tradition. But, in practice, these systems of right would be subsumed under a regime that attempted to equalize all competing desires. “Equality” would replace “liberty” as the central watchword of the civil rights activist. In implementing this equality, most liberties would be subject to majority rule. This would have the effect of subjecting rights to the same, majoritarian, democratic processes that deal with most questions of public and political policy.

In effect, the democratic system would revert to a new paternalism, not one based on the divine right of kings, bishops, and dictators, but on the collective subjective desires of the community of autonomous individuals. Prevented from acknowledging a transcendent element, there is no objective element of stewardship to consider, nothing to adjudicate between the conflicting desires of the members of the group, except a rule by the majority or the most popular desire.

Under this system, the language of human dignity is retained, because humanity is all we have. Indeed, the human becomes virtually divine in a sense, because it defines and encompasses its own reality. But it is an extraordinarily limited divinity, as it is hemmed and limited by the subjective desires of its divine neighbor. Ultimately, it is a very thin dignity that does not produce many meaningful, measurable duties towards oneself or others, except perhaps the duty to stay alive and to not physically harm others.

In answering the age-old question, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” the new dignity answers with a version of the clever evasion offered by the lawyer to Christ, “But who is my brother?” The answer to this question offered by the new dignity is—those who are aggrieved like me, who I most identify with. Thus, we have the new regime of identity politics, where one’s political view is tightly bound to one’s racial, ethnic, social, religious, gender or class identity. Various competing groups will ally on those questions where the greatest number of desires overlap.

Crucially, the new system provides nothing objective or principled to press back against a majoritarian rule based on a new paternalism over the individual. Any number of issues take on the importance given previously to the most sacred notions



of human rights, such as bodily integrity, the right to be free from torture and abuse, and the right and freedom of religious worship and practice.

Thus, our collective desire for safety and security in the age of terror is seen as justifying a policy and practice of “enhanced interrogation” methods that previously the American government had condemned as torture. Persons are held for years without trial and a failure of due process that would have been viewed, for the entirety of the 20th century, as a gross violation of basic constitution rights.

People, including American citizens, who can be labeled “terrorists,” are targeted far from any active field of battle, for assassination by drone strikes based purely on presidential fiat. These assassinations are, again, acts that in pre-war-on-terror times would have been viewed as illegal and unconstitutional, as well as unethical and immoral. But our “desires” for safety and security are seen, in both the popular mind and in parts of the legal and political community, as overcoming our perceived enemies’ “desires” for liberty, bodily integrity, and even life.

In addition, in America, private sexual preferences and behaviors are given equal, and at times superior, legal pride of place and protection in a manner that impairs the convictions and practices of religious persons. In our new regime of human rights, all desires and preferences are equal, but as in George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*, some desires and preferences are more equal than others.

Those preferences that are more equal would be the ones whose ideological bases are those consistent with the ruling ideology of naturalistic materialism and secularism. Thus, personal sexual preferences, including same-sex behavior and marriage, generally prevail against millennia-old religious and moral convictions regarding sexual behavior and the ordering of the family. All of these results flow logically and consistently, I believe, from the new, thin, purely self-ownership notion of human dignity.

III. DISSENTING PROTESTANTISM AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ROBUST CONCEPTIONS OF HUMAN DIGNITY

These claims about the differences between stewardship versus self-ownership forms of dignity are not merely logical and theoretical. They can be seen in the historical record. As the track record of the new human dignity can be seen in the unfolding events around us of human rights abuses and impairment of basic and fundamental liberties, so the track record of the version of dignity based on stewardship has left distinct footprints in the historical record.

These prints have been recently and expertly excavated by a political scientist who has explored the connection between dissenting Protestant missions and the rise of global democracy and human freedoms and liberties. Robert Woodberry, in his groundbreaking article “The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy,” published in the flagship secular political science journal the *American Political Science Review*, makes the historical and statistical case for this connection between dissenting



Protestantism and global democracy.¹⁵ He demonstrates a very strong correlation between non-conformist Protestant missions and the implementation of mass education, mass printing, rise of social institutions, and rule of law, all necessary building blocks of functioning democracies. Protestant workers contributed to these factors, Woodberry shows historically, because of their ideology of the equality and dignity of the individual before God.

On the face of it, this seems an ambitious and even audacious claim. Yet Woodberry's thesis withstood secular and skeptical peer reviewers at APSR and in the larger academic community. The strength of his documentation is causing political scientists and historians to re-think and re-evaluate the causative role of religion in political and social development. Previously it had often been dismissed as a "soft" or secondary factor, itself driven largely by "hard" factors such economic, political, or social class interests. Woodberry makes a compelling case that this is not so and that religion matters and often helps shape these other factors.

The paper is too complex to fully summarize here, but the following points are directly relevant to the issues of human dignity and rights.

A. Woodberry notes that it is not just Christianity or Protestantism in general that is associated with the growth and spread of liberal democracy and civil freedoms, but that of what he terms "Conversionary Protestantism," which overlaps significantly with what I called "Dissenting Protestantism."¹⁶ He notes that the positive correlation between widespread education of laity, spread of printing, and resistance to abuse by the commercial and political interests of the colonizers is only connected with non-state connected or sponsored missionaries. So missionaries from state-connected churches, whether they be Catholic or magisterial Protestant churches, did not show such correlations.¹⁷

Thus, those missionaries that advanced democratic structures were from churches that took most seriously the human dignity of stewardship rooted in the Protestant doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. This belief emphasized the importance of individual Bible study leading to personal belief and faith by all. It led to arguments for the separation of church and state, eventually systematized by Locke's political philosophy.

As Woodberry puts it in his discussion of the rise of mass printing catalyzed by non-conformist or dissenting Protestant missionaries: They "expected lay people to make their own religious choices. They believed people are saved not through sacraments or group membership but by 'true faith in God;' thus, each individual had to

¹⁵ Robert Woodberry, "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy," *American Political Science Review*, Vol 106, No 2, May 2012, 244-270.

¹⁶ Ibid 244, no 1; "conversionary Protestantism" is an unfortunate label, as it implies that only non-state churches were concerned with conversion. This is not true, as many state church missionaries, including Anglicans, Lutherans, and Calvinists, were concerned with the individual experience of conversion of the believer. Better language would focus on the relation of the church to the state, which often indicates the ability of the church to be an independent actor. Thus, in this article I use the language "dissenting" or "non-conforming" Protestant.

¹⁷ Ibid 246-247.



decide which faith to follow.” These views “changed people’s ideas about who books were for. According to CPs [Conversionary Protestants], *everyone* needed access to “God’s word”—not just elites. Therefore, *everyone* needed to read, including women and the poor...”¹⁸

B. Woodberry’s analysis makes clear that it is not just a generic belief in human worth and dignity that spread democratic institutions, but a commitment to helping people actualize that dignity by providing them with the education, tools, and resources to do so. Along with commitments to human equality, the dissenting Protestants engaged in mass education (not just education of the elites as other groups carried out), development and spread of mass printing, the activation of non-state civil organizations, and the promotion of the rule of law (equality before the law). All of these elements contributed to the shaping of a culture where liberal democracy could take root and flourish.¹⁹

Thus, it was not just support of human dignity in the abstract that mattered, or even implementation of a legal scheme to protect rights. Rather, such a legal structure could only meaningfully operate when these other conditions were in place: an educated populace who could read and write, who could spread ideas and interests in print, organize societies to share and further their views and interests, and ultimately shape political and legal patterns.

C. The programs and assistance of the dissenting missionaries were not such that made persons dependent on their long-term care, or nurture, or support. Rather, they gave people the ability to care, nurture, and support themselves and others in an engaged and active civil society. Indeed, after the catalyzing influence of these missionaries, other religious and secular groups also became involved with mass education, printing, and institution building, often to compete with the Protestant efforts in these areas. Many countries that developed the features of a liberal democracy soon did not require the Protestant involvement to keep it going, and many forgot that they were involved at all. But Woodberry has statistically documented the strong correlation between Protestant missions and the rise of democracy in no less than 142 non-European societies.²⁰

D. A significant feature of what made the non-state Protestant missionaries effective was their willingness to oppose abusive colonial practices by commercial or governmental officials. It was not that the missionaries were not “racist” in some sense; they were products of their time in many ways.²¹ Yet they did possess a commitment to the equality of human dignity as all persons were made in the image of God.

¹⁸ Ibid 249.

¹⁹ Ibid 247-254.

²⁰ Ibid 245.

²¹ Woodberry notes that, ironically, racism was worse among more educated missionaries who had absorbed ideas about “scientific racism.” Still, “missionaries were typically far less racist than other colonial groups” (Ibid 255, no 28).



Because CP missionaries were not connected with the state, they were able and willing to fight abuses of natives and locals in a variety of ways, including writing to supporters and newspapers back home, rallying legislative support for proposals, reigning in commercial and government leaders, and, in some instances, confronting abuses openly in the field.²²

In carrying out these efforts to curb colonial abuses, the missionaries made explicit their underlying philosophy of the obligations of stewardship in relation to human dignity. As Woodberry puts it, they “popularized the idea of ‘trusteeship,’ [another term for stewardship]—that the only justification of colonization was the ‘social uplift’ of the colonized people.”²³ This notion of “social uplift” may have had a paternalistic air to it, and this was undoubtedly reflected in some of their practices. But the missionaries generally did not forget that the social uplift was to put colonized people into a better position to carry out their own roles as stewards of themselves and their countries. Hence, their emphasis was on education, printing, and the creation of structures and systems which would give those locals willing to apply themselves the tools to manage themselves and their countries in a world rapidly becoming much more globally connected, industrialized, and commercialized.

This is not meant to be a triumphalistic ode to the virtues of Protestantism. Any religion or even ideology that chooses to take human dignity seriously, in terms of stewardship, can support and produce such results. Protestants that were more paternalistic in their outlook and connected with state churches, the so-called magisterial Protestants, did not have such a politically significant impact in the mission field. On the other hand, at various times in history both Jewish and Muslim groups have taken this type of dignity seriously and have had periods of cultural growth and enlightenment as a result. The relative peace and flourishing of Jewish and Christian “heretical” groups in medieval Muslim Spain is one such example.²⁴

In response to Protestant educational and printing efforts, Catholics also made significant contributions to these institutions, in many instances eventually outstripping Protestant achievements. After Vatican II, Catholics also made human dignity and freedom formally a central part of their philosophy of social and political engagement.

The reality is that most religious or even political groups that take this thick sense of human dignity seriously, and acknowledge the stewardship role of helping others actualize their own role as stewards, can promote meaningful growth and protection of human rights and liberties. It is just that during much of the 18th and 19th centuries the evidence strongly indicates that it was dissenting Protestantism that

²² Ibid 254-255.

²³ Ibid 255.

²⁴ Maria Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*, (New York NY: Back Bay Books, 2002). While claims of a “golden age” of toleration may be overstated, Jews, and even certain minority Christian groups, were treated with greater freedom and dignity in Medieval Spain, especially, during the 10th and 11th centuries, than in most other places in Europe.



was the primary vessel for the worldwide spread of these values.

Thus, the lesson that should not be lost on us today is not the alleged superiority of any particular religious tradition, but of the importance of a certain kind of human dignity to the creation and maintenance of a meaningful and robust system of human rights in a society. It must strike the balance between too much or too mediated a transcendence and the absence of any notion of transcendence, the collapse of all values into the subjective, autonomous self.

Further, it must recognize that commitment to the importance of human rights in speech or on paper is insufficient in itself to guarantee that these rights will be protected. Rather, there must be a constant safeguard of the institutions that ensure the implementation of these rights: education for all, a vibrant and free print culture, civic organizations that provide a buffer against state institutions, the checks and balances that provide a meaningful rule of law—and all of this sustained in the popular mind by an ethos of the transcendent dignity of the individual.

The potential paradox or irony this represents is that the dissenting Protestants did their jobs in good part because of their separation from the state. So any attempt to enforce or even promote some kind of minimal civil religion will actually undermine the very spirit and ethos it is seeking to promote. But the state does not necessarily need to become “religious” or promote “religion” to recognize that there is a power greater than itself, a transcendent realm which will limit its own power in dealing with its citizens.

It is also a realm that can provide value and guidance to the concept of stewardship. Rightly defined, stewardship will provide guidance to create a minimal set of common values that provide the stronger and richer in society with obligations to the poorer and weaker; but they will be obligations to equip and empower, rather than to dominate and dictate, either in a hard or soft paternalistic tyranny. Let all people of faith do what we can to recover and promote the transcendent dignity of stewardship as a check and guide to the rising tide of paternalism and tyranny in our modern world.