

Human Dignity in a Global World

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In late modernity we have become increasingly aware of the intrinsic ambivalence that shapes personal and communal identities. The binary distinctions that enabled us to structure and shape personal and communal identities by establishing ideological, religious, ethnic and communal boundaries cannot be sustained any longer in the compressed space of the global world. Ambivalence defies structures and boundaries that nurture familiarity. Globalization as an ambivalent notion is many things at once; it does not subscribe to binary distinctions of either/or, benign/malignant. Globalization along with its cultural, economic and social advances generates new forms of oppression, suffering and waste of human lives. It causes fear and insecurity and in some instances leads its victims, especially those who feel that it endangers their life patterns and deprives them the necessary resources and power to live relatively well, to acts of violence¹.

The horrors of violence and the cries of its victims have led to the recognition that while violence is an extremely polyvalent and complex phenomenon involving matters of morality, ideology and culture, it is preventable by addressing its root causes and by devising structures, agencies and skills that cultivate a culture of peace. We are presently searching for rules, procedures and institutions designed both to deter the vices and to facilitate the virtues of the global world. Such an enterprise requires that we shift our emphasis on our cultural, religious and ethno-racial communal symbols and systems of beliefs from those elements that accentuate difference and lead to exclusion to those that recognize the dignity and the common humanity of all people in their irreducible differences². It

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1. BAUMAN Z., *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Ithaca, New York; Cornell University Press, 1991)

2. For an attempt to reflect on the dialectic relationship between the «inside» and the «outside» in the life of the Orthodox Church see issue 101 (2007) of the theological journal *Synaxis*.

is in this context that the notion of human dignity has captured the imagination and the hopes of all oppressed and persecuted people as a normative principle and the much desired basis for life in the modern world.

The Christian churches in their ecumenical fellowship and in their desire to manifest their unity in Christ have recognized that their faithfulness to the Gospel demands their active participation and contribution in collaborative efforts towards the building of a culture of peace. The awareness that religious beliefs and practices in some instances can be interpreted and used to accentuate differences and generate violence has led them to search for ways to remain faithful to their particularities and at the same time to embrace others –at least in the public realm of life– with a sense of justice and recognition of their difference. The churches in an improvised culture that tends to view human life as a dispensable commodity and which resolves its conflicts through the politics of domination, fear and terror, are challenged to bring forth those insights of the Christian tradition that advance human solidarity, justice and peace. Their contributions to the ongoing dialogue for a broader conception of human dignity, connected with people’s narratives of life, are indispensable elements that contribute to the realization of this goal.

The proliferation of international and national declarations about human dignity and rights, issued after 1945, is a reaction to the atrocities and the suffering of the Second World War³. It is necessary to develop safeguards to protect people from arbitrary communal or state domination, especially now in the modern world with all its advances in the technology of domination⁴. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 opened its preamble with what would become classic words: «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»⁵. Governments were exhorted

3. For the story of the emergence of modern selfhood, individualism and a concept of dignity –and the role of Christianity– see: TAYLOR CH., *Sources of the Self* (Harvard, Mass.; Cambridge University Press, 1989) and ABERCROMBIE N., HILL S., TURNER B., *Sovereign Individuals of Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986).

4. LITTLE D., «Human Rights and Responsibilities in Pluralistic world», in *The Orthodox Churches in a Pluralistic World*, ed., Emmanuel Clapsis (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 2004), p. 79.

5. Reprinted in BROWNIE I., ed., *Basic Documents on Human Rights*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 21.

to create conditions conducive to the realization and protection of these inviolate rights and to root out discrimination, whether social or cultural, or whether based on sex, race, color, social distinction, language or religion⁶. Many democratic nations have included the notion of human dignity in their constitution and their constitutional law. What is characteristic of these declarations is the location of the value of human beings in a «substantial self» as an aspect of his or hers subjectivity, irrespective of the contexts and the relations that define the identity of each human being.

Christian churches and ecumenical organizations have participated in the developing tradition of human rights and have produced significant declarations on human rights with a varying emphasis on human dignity. The Roman Catholic Church in several documents produced during and after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), but especially in *Dignitatis Humanae*, endorsed the notion of human rights. It affirmed that every person is created by God with «dignity, intelligence and free will... and has rights flowing directly and simultaneously from his very nature»⁷.

The notion of human dignity is foundational in the imagination of many desperate people and peoples around the world that dream of greater justice and freedom in their personal and communal space. It shapes a range of contemporary debates on issues from war and poverty to abortion, human cloning and euthanasia. Yet, the pervasiveness of the discourse on dignity masks the extent to which the meaning and substance of the term has become vague and contested. Nowadays we speak about the dignity of luxury, pleasure and leisure; the dignity of poverty, pain and imprisonment; the dignity of identity, belonging and difference; the dignity of ethnic, cultural and linguistic purity, the dignity of sex, gender and sexual preference and the dignity of aging, dying and death. An undisciplined use of the notion of dignity endangers its value⁸.

6. See *ibid*; and *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965), in *Documents of Vatican II*, 675.

7. *Pacem in Terris* (1963), par. 9, reprinted in GREMILLION J., ed., *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching since Pope John* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1976), p. 201, 203.

8. WITTE J., Jr., «Between Sanctity and Depravity: Human Dignity in Protestant Perspective», in Robert P. Kraynak and Glen Tinder eds., *In Defense of Human Dignity: Essays for our Times* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame, 2003), 122.

The global endorsement and significance of the notion of human dignity has evoked reflection on its importance beyond the boundaries of the Judeo-Christian world and of western secular thought. New voices –especially those from Africa, Asia and Latin America, and from various Buddhist, Confucian, Hindu, Islamic, and Traditional communities– with their unique insights, values and interpretation - demand to be heard and contribute to a global enhancement of the notion of human dignity and rights. The task of defining the appropriate ambition of human dignity and human rights today must be a multidisciplinary, multireligious and multicultural exercise. Many disciplines, religions and cultures around the globe have unique sources and resources and texts and traditions which speak to human dignity and human rights. It is essential that each community be allowed to speak with its own unique accent and to work, with its own distinct methods, on human dignity and human rights, in an exercise that is multi - rather than interdisciplinary, interreligious, and intercultural in character. Each of these disciplines, religions and cultures as participants in a global discussion and appreciation of human dignity and rights must develop a capacity for bilingualism – an ability to speak with insiders and outsiders alike about their unique understanding of the origin, nature and purpose of human dignity and human rights⁹. This approach of having scholars from different traditions, cultures and religions addressing issues of human dignity and rights, based on their own traditions and developed on their own terms, has already commenced¹⁰. The conversation itself will not advance the cause of increasing human dignity throughout the world. Respect for human dignity and recognition of human rights demands the development of a culture of peace and justice. «A form of words by itself secures nothing; words pregnant with meaning in one culture may be entirely barren in another»¹¹. The language of human dignity and

9. Ibid., 122.

10. See, e.g., NOVAK D., *Covenantal Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); ABDULLAHI AHMED AN-NAÏM, *Toward an Islamic Revolution: Civil Liberties, Human Rights, and International Law* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990); WM. THEODORE DE BARY and WEIMING TU, eds., *Confucianism and Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); BLOOM IRENE, MARTIN J. PAUL, and PROUDFOOT WAYNE L., eds., *Religious Diversity and Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

11. NOONAN JOHN T., Jr., «The Tensions and the Ideals», in *Religious Human Rights: Legal Perspectives*, vol. 2, eds. John Witte Jr. and Jonah D. van de Vyver (The Hague and Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1996), p. 594.

rights do not assume any salience in societies that lack constitutional process to give them meaning and measure. They have little cogency in communities that lack the ethos and the ethic to render human rights violations as a source of shame and regret, restraint and respect, confession and responsibility, reconciliation and restitution¹².

Human Dignity and Changing Consciousness

Reflecting on how social norms have been used and have evolved in religious and secular scientific thought, we must inevitably acknowledge that they generally reflect changes in human consciousness. Changes in human consciousness are by nature morally ambivalent. For instance changes in the use and understanding of human dignity may endanger its importance and at the same time can carry hopeful features. Every turn of collective consciousness seems to be morally ambivalent, both bringing new moral dangers and also creating new moral opportunities. Changes in moral consciousness are generally too ambivalent to be regarded as either progress or decline. We need to understand how the moral consciousness of our time both poses threats to human dignity and brings the promise of an enhancement of human dignity.

There has been a general tendency over the last few centuries for concepts to refer less exclusively to social positions and increasingly to more internal matters. The danger of this shift is the lack of concern with the external, social context of human life. But the aspiration to achieve authenticity, which is such a marked feature of contemporary consciousness, carries a welcome concern that people should have the conditions necessary for their self-fulfillment. This turn to subjectivity is also reflected in contemporary thinking about dignity. Dignity is increasingly concerned not just with the externals of social position and behavior but with social experiences and feelings. Respecting people's dignity now not only involves showing appropriate respect in social behavior, but increasingly also means ensuring that people have appropriate opportunities for self-expression. With this focus on the internal, differences between people in their

12. SHESTACK JEROME J., «Globalization of Human Rights Law», *Fordham International Law Journal* 21(1997), p. 558.

thinking have become much more significant. One person may feel that their dignity has been challenged where another would not. The increasing sensitivity to possible indignities has rather mixed implications. On the one hand, such sensitizing may be desirable if it increases the respect with which people are treated. On the other hand, it may breed an excessive self-concern that sits uneasily with the Christian ideal of kenotic love.

The recognition of the moral ambivalence of the changing human consciousness does not allow the embrace of totalistic systems, either religious or secular, in our interpretation of what it is to be human. Such systems can only be sustained at the expense of the incomprehensible mystery and multidimensionality of human nature¹³. «Nothing but» reductionism is always seeking to assert a proposition about the basic nature of humanity, that we are basically just this or that (the products of our genes, of our neurons, of our primitive instincts, and so on). This, however, is a fallacious conclusion. The conclusions that can properly be drawn about human beings from such premises are qualitative ones, not absolute ones. Our genes, our neurons, our basic instincts, and so on, affect how we function qualitatively as human beings, but they do not yield absolute, ontological conclusions about what we are as human beings. It is the absolute forms of reductionism that are pernicious, incompatible with religious views, and that are to be resisted.

In the context of the ongoing dialogue of Christian churches with secular sciences and religious and cultural traditions about human dignity, it is possible to develop a much broader understanding of human dignity by integrating some of their qualitative claims about the *humanum*. For instance, there is a perception among religious people that Darwinism and Freudianism are secular threats against the dignity of the human person. Yet a closer examination leads to an appreciation of their insights. The Darwinian proposition that we were descended from other primates suggests that we were likely to have some things in common with the primates, which in turn implies that not all our behavior is as dignified as we might like to think. For instance, the tendency to fight under threat is something determined by genetic disposition. This point, however, was often misheard as being more absolute – an ontological statement about human dig-

13. NISSIOTIS NIKOS A., «Secular and Christian Images of Human Person», *Θεολογία* 52 (1982), p. 947-989; 53 (1983), p. 90-122.

nity, that because we were descended from other animals we are just animals. Heard in that way, it is felt to be an attack on the proposition that we all have a basic dignity as members of the human race. The same is true with Freudianism. The Freudian proposition that much of our apparently higher behavior arises from an adjustment to the primitive instincts of the *id* suggests that our higher behaviors, on close examination, may turn out to be more morally ambivalent than we would like to think. Correctly understood, however, this does not lead to the conclusion that we are nothing but the products of our primitive instincts, or undermines the proposition that we have a basic, core dignity as human beings. A refusal to accept the exclusive claims of reductionistic theories and ideologies that claim «nothing but» facilitates the dialogue on broadening the notion of human dignity. In particular, a clearer distinction between absolute and qualitative senses of the concept of dignity would reduce the sense of alleged threat presented, for instance, by either Darwinism or Freudianism.

The repudiation of reductionistic, «nothing but» religious or secular ideologies about what it is to be human must be accompanied by a recognition that human dignity is endangered by an impoverished and distorted human imagination. As Charles Taylor has described, the concern with how we see things, and with the possibility of seeing things differently, has become a modern obsession. Though this preoccupation is very clear in modern thinking, it is not clear how it relates to what happens in practice. Our ideological obsession with the importance of seeing things straight has not obviously been accompanied by people making much headway in actually so seeing them. Indeed, the preoccupation may have arisen from a growing sense of alienation, and been some sort of attempt to repair that alienation.

The alienated experience of life seems to arise from a failure of imagination and from an impoverishment of our capacity to envisage properly the potential richness of our experience. In human relationships such a failure of imagination might be called a lack of empathy. Alongside the failure of the imagination there are also distortions or pollutions of the imagination. Failures of imagination bring a sense of disenchantment. Meaning fades, and reductionist «nothing but» ideas about human nature seem increasingly attractive. In contrast, where the imagination becomes distorted, excessive appetites arise in the form of addictions or sexual preoccupations. Particular situations, far from being meaningless, create powerful anxieties or worries.

Though failures and distortions of imagination are in some sense opposite, they can also coexist in an insidious way. Both can undermine the capacity for people to treat one another with respect. Failures of imagination can result in people being treated as mere objects, with no concern for what they might be thinking or feeling. Distortions of imagination, in contrast, can lead to people being treated as players in a perverted game. Rather than being treated with indifference, people are endowed with «projections» that result in our seeing in one another simply what we wish to see. In the former people are accorded no real identity at all; in the latter they are seen as mere extensions of our own needs and personality. In neither case is there any attention to what people actually are, or any proper respect for their distinct identity. That requires an imagination that is prepared to reach out to the other person and try to understand what it is like to be him or her. Here, the affirmation that God's Spirit is active in the entirety of God's creation and in history, could advance the recognition of God's presence in all, which is the foundation of the Christian affirmation of the dignity of all human beings. It is the Holy Spirit that makes possible the imaginative response to other people that is required if they are to be treated with proper dignity as creatures of God. Our hope that human beings will develop proper respect for one another is grounded in what God has granted to the created world through His Son and the Holy Spirit.

Human Dignity and its Decontextualization in Modern Times

The story of the emergence of a distinctively modern conception of human dignity is too complex to recount in any detail. It is a story in which Christianity plays an important role along with the classical tradition supplemented and challenged by other intellectual influences, including –after the sixteenth century– perspectives shaped by the rise of the natural and then the human and social sciences. It is commonly recognized that the story of the emergence of modern conceptions of human dignity cannot be told without reference to social, political and economic factors as well as cultural ones –including growth of property– ownership, the decline of political absolutism, the spread of democratic arrangements and the extension of franchise, de-colonization and globalization. Wars have also played an important part, with reaction against religious wars giving impetus to conceptions of universal humanity and human dignity.

The modern conception of human dignity reflects the philosophy of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), especially in his virtual identification of human dignity with a single preeminent faculty: rational freedom; the elevation of human dignity to a central –indeed foundational– normative principle for ethical reflection; and last in his conceptual linkage of the concept of human dignity with corresponding and specific rights inherent in, and belonging to, every human being. He argued in *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, that the dignity of the human being derives from the fact that he or she alone is «free from all laws of nature, obedient only to those laws which he himself prescribes». Thus, the capacity for autonomous rational agency is the root of human dignity. Immanuel Kant vindicates a conception of dignity that stands alone, prior to and independent of, every concept of God; this in turn requires that all persons be treated and treat themselves as ends in themselves and never merely as a means to another's ends. It leads to the moral assumption that human beings, as autonomous entities, must exercise their autonomy, as rational agents, free from any form of coercion or paternalistic interference.

Nowadays, it is recognized that intersecting cultural and social developments have stripped the notion of human dignity from its sustaining context without supplying in some instances viable alternatives. There may be good reasons why the concept of human dignity had to be cut free from its theological roots, and there are some valuable outcomes of such a decontextualization. But the price that has been paid has been the gradual weakening of the concept and a blunting of its power to diagnose and resist contemporary endangerments of the very dignity it strives to secure. It is our contention that human dignity once removed from the theological and ecclesial context proves remarkably fragile –insufficient to sustain the ethical and metaphysical weight that modern rights– talk would place upon it. Thus there is a need to recontextualize the notion of human dignity so it can serve as a meaningful point of orientation for human thought and action¹⁴. The need of recontextualizing the notion of human dignity is further accentuated by the fact that it has become a global norm for a culture of peace and justice. There is a need to embed the notion of human digni-

14. SOULEN R. KENDAL and WOODHEAD LINDA, eds., *God and Human Dignity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), p. 1.

ty in multiple sustaining contexts since its meaningfulness depends on a broader and more comprehensive cultural, conceptual and social framework¹⁵.

Such a process invites the Christian churches to bring back into contact with their traditions the notion of human dignity, that is, what it means to be a human being and to what degree we are responsible for the dignity, life and future of other human beings, especially of those who are persecuted, oppressed and marginalized.

Orthodox reflections on Human Dignity and Rights

Orthodox theologians have not addressed –or at least have not considered crucial to their concerns– the issue of human dignity and rights¹⁶. Some of them consider the notion of human dignity and rights as alien to the Spirit of Orthodoxy, a western construct shaped by the problematics of Western Christianity and the secular spirit of the enlightenment¹⁷. The Orthodox churches historically have been less disposed to defend human rights than the Roman Catholic Church and Protestantism. This is mainly attributed to the emphasis Orthodoxy gives to a highly corporate and sacramental view of salvation that does not encourage autonomy on religious grounds. Another contributing factor is its reluctance to interact with law as well as the traditional understanding of church and state relationships. These factors have contributed to a conceptual perception that does not favor the cultivation or the advocacy of human rights. However, it is wrong to assume that the ethos of Orthodoxy does not permit the development of a sensitivity to human right and its advocacy. Quite to the contrary, the Orthodox view of human dignity supports the idea of human rights. The possibility for a greater sensitivity and advocacy of human rights issues by the Orthodox churches is highly probable since under the pressure of historic challenges people often find new meaning in traditional ideas. Thus, as Paul Valliere commenting on human rights movements in the former Soviet Union has stated:

15. Ibid, p. 2.

16. AGOURIDIS SAVVAS, *Τὰ Ἀνθρώπινα Δικαιώματα στὸ Δυτικὸ Κόσμο: Ἱστορικὴ καὶ Κοινωνικὴ Ἀνασκόπηση* (Athens: Filistor, 1998), p. 12.

17. GUROIAN VIGEN, «Human Rights and Modern Western Faith: An Orthodox Christian Assessment», *Journal of Religious Ethics* 26 (1998) pp. 241-247.

«while some of the most important ideals of Orthodoxy tend to discourage individuals from viewing themselves as right-bearers over against the community, and discourage the community from viewing itself as distinct from the state, these ideals did not prevent a lively Orthodox rights movement from developing»¹⁸. Recently important contributions have been published defending the notion of human rights and attempting to embed them within an Orthodox understanding of being human as communion in the context of the Trinitarian faith¹⁹.

The need to develop an Orthodox contribution to the notion of human dignity cannot be ignored any longer since most of the Orthodox churches currently exist in states that espouse the principles and values of liberal democracy. In addition, Orthodox churches living in oppressive contexts, as persecuted and oppressed minorities, appeal to the notion of human dignity and rights for their survival and participation in the communal life with dignity and freedom. The recognition that the notion of human dignity and rights has captured the imagination of people throughout the world who desire to live free from oppressive external powers, along with the current global discussions about human dignity and rights, is an invitation for Orthodox theology to contribute in an intelligible and communicable language its spiritual resources and insights.

The Orthodox critique of the human rights tradition focuses on their reduction, especially in affluent western countries, to a basis that fortifies the self, leads to self-centeredness and legitimizes self-gratification. «In the Eastern Orthodox understanding, the contents of the existing human rights documents are just beginnings; they do nothing to safeguard the dignity of persons against

18. VALLIERE PAUL, «Russian Orthodoxy and Human Rights», in *Religious Diversity and Human Rights*, eds. Irene Bloom, J. Paul Martin, Wayne L. Proudfoot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 281.

19. DELIKOSTANTIS KOSTAS, *Τὰ Δικαιώματα τοῦ Ἀνθρώπου - Δυτικό Ἰδεολόγημα ἢ Οἰκουμενικό ἦθος?* (Thessalonike: Kyriakidis, 1995); YIANNARAS CHRISTOS, *Ἡ Ἀπανθροπία τοῦ Δικαιώματος* (Athens: Domos, 1998); VALLIERE PAUL, «Russian Orthodoxy and Human Rights», in *Religious Diversity and Human Rights*, eds. Irene Bloom, J. Paul Martin, Wayne L. Proudfoot (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 278-312; HARAKAS STANLEY S., «Human Rights: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective», *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34 (1982), pp. 13-24; YANNOULATOS ANASTASIOS, «Eastern Orthodoxy and Human Rights», *International Review of Missions* 73(1984) pp. 456-466; HOLMAN SUSAN R., «Human Rights Language in the Cappadocians», *Pro Ecclesia* 9(2000), pp. 480-488.

domination by their egos»²⁰. This, in their view, contributes to social fragmentation that endangers human solidarity, love and communion - necessary elements and norms for a compassionate and just community. They consider this derangement of the human rights tradition to be a consequence of its western theological and philosophical foundations. Yet, even the most severe critics of the human rights tradition recognize its value and desire to place it in the context of a communal or ecclesial framework and ethos²¹. While the criticism of Orthodoxy against the philosophical and theological grounds of the human rights tradition may be an important remedy to its current crisis, Orthodox theologians must also be critical of oppressive communal structures of dominance that do not allow people to be different or do not recognize their differences within their communal life²². In other words, the turn to subjectivity as it has been developed in the West may be an important corrective to the totalistic inclinations of communal life. The Orthodox emphasis on communal life and the primacy of relations is also, respectively, an equally important corrective to western individualism and social fragmentation. The choice that we have is neither either/or, nor an issue of balance between human subjectivity and community, but of a continuous reflexive relationship of mutual fermentation and enrichment as well as of mutual correction²³. The conversation of Orthodoxy with other Christian traditions, as well as religious and secular ideologies, on the notion of human dignity may bring a certain freshness and clarity to theological anthropology, which has not been one of the liveliest areas of theology²⁴.

20. YANNOULATOS ANASTASIOS, «Eastern Orthodoxy and Human Rights», *International Review of Missions* 73(1984) p. 454.

21. YANNARAS CHRISTOS, *Ἡ Ἀπανθρωπιὰ τοῦ Δικτυώματος* (Athens: Domos, 1998), p. 184-189: «Ἡ νομικὴ βάση τῶν ἀτομικῶν δικαιωμάτων μπορεῖ νὰ λειτουργήσῃ ὡς «φυσικό» ἀφαιρετικό δεδομένο γιὰ τὴ συγκρότηση σχέσεων κοινωνίας» p. 186

22. For an illuminating survey of human autonomy in Byzantium, the right to dissent from communal sensibilities and beliefs see: KAZHDAN ALEXANDER and CONSTABLE GILES, *People and Power in Byzantium: An Introduction to Modern Byzantine Studies* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Center for Byzantine Studies, 1982); Chrysa A. Maltezos edit., *Οἱ Περιθωριακοὶ στὸ Βυζάντιο* (Athens: Idryma Goulandri-Horn, 1993).

23. TAYLOR CHARLES, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: 2007).

24. WARE KALLISTOS, *Ἡ Ὁρθόδοξη Θεολογία στὸν 21ο Αἰῶνα* (Athens, 2005), p. 34. Kalistos Ware exhorts Orthodox theologians to move beyond confessionalism in their anthropological reflection that must preoccupy their attention in the twenty-first century: «Ἐλπίζω ὅτι, στή

Human dignity in Christian thought is based on the biblical and patristic tradition that human beings are created in God's image. All human beings exist in relationship to God, to themselves and to the world, a world both of personal and social interaction and as a material cosmos. These relations are not external relations attached to an already existing substance; they are internal relations that make up their human identity. Human beings are indeed set within a group of structures of relationships, which they have not constructed, but which constitute their being. This structure of relatedness confronts us with the obligation of shaping these relationships: we relate in order to relate. The crucial question is how we actively relate to the relationships that shape our identity. Do we, for instance, recognize the created sociality of all human beings or do we contradict it by constructing our subjectivity as denial of all sociality? Christian theological anthropology locates the *humanum* not in the relationship of humans to themselves (i.e., capacity for reflection, self-consciousness) or in the relationship to the world, but primarily in God's relationship to humans. This is the context in which the notion of human dignity must be located. Theologically, human dignity is a distinction which humans possess apart from, and independent of, any capacity they possess in their relationship to themselves or to the world. The dignity of each human being originates in God's creating, redeeming and deifying grace that enables human beings to become ecstatic, transcending their self-existence and moving towards the fullness of their humanity in life sustaining and life transforming relations. It is only in communion that human beings become truly what they are destined to be by God.

Though both theology and secular thinking have a sense of human dignity as universal, they handle this in very different ways. Human dignity in theology is primarily seen as God's unconditional gift to all people while for others it is viewed as an inherent quality of each human being as an essential self. There are, however, different ways in which something can be experienced as a gift. It is possible for people to feel demeaned or patronized by being told that some-

διερεύνηση αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἐλάχιστα ἐξερευνημένου πεδίου τῆς Χριστιανικῆς ἀνθρωπολογίας, ἐμεῖς οἱ Ὁρθόδοξοι δὲν θὰ προσπαθήσουμε νὰ ἐργαστοῦμε σὲ ἀπομόνωση. Ὑπάρχουν πολλὰ πού μποροῦμε νὰ μάθουμε ἀπὸ δυτικούς εἰδικούς - φιλοσόφους, θεολόγους, κοινωνικούς ἐπιστήμονες καὶ ψυχολόγους πού θὰ ἐμβαθύνουν τὴν κατανόηση τῆς δικῆς μας Ὁρθόδοξης παράδοσης. Ἄς προσπαθήσουμε νὰ ἐπιτύχουμε μιὰ κατανόηση τοῦ ἀνθρώπινου προσώπου, ἢ ὅποια θὰ εἶναι γνήσια οἰκουμενική».

thing is a gift when they feel it is a basic part of their nature or constitution or is something to which they are entitled. For others, however, receiving a gift is an experience highly affirming and very much to be welcomed. Seeing dignity as a gift carries tasks and obligations appropriate to good stewardship of the gift, whereas thinking of rights carries no such obligation. When a Christian tradition speaks of something being a gift of God, though the latter is intended, sometimes, in the context of the post-Enlightenment thought, it is heard as being patronizing.

In Christian theology, everything that is appropriate for human beings are gifts of God. Thus human dignity is not self-grounded possession enjoyed apart from a relationship to the Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier. As Chrysostom writes memorably in a sermon on Philippians, «Humans possess dignity of rational nature, but this comes to them as a gift, not as something they have earned. Hence there is no natural preeminence amongst us, for no good thing is naturally our own»²⁵. Because God confers human dignity, its measure and norm is to be discovered not in social convention but in God and in the pattern of God's action toward humankind in creation and redemption in Christ. In response to critics of Christianity who found it ridiculous that «poor, unskilled people should dispute about heavenly things», Minucius Felix (late second or early third century) replied, «let him know that all men are begotten alike, with a capacity and ability of reasoning and feeling, without preference of age, sex, or dignity»²⁶.

The perception that every human being has an inherent dignity is insufficient to embrace the totality of life and theologically is seen to be a static notion. It leaves no room for eschatology, no scope for a dynamic unfolding of God's purpose in relation to human dignity. A Christian theology of dignity needs to be balanced by an eschatological approach; creation is a continuing process and consequently it is inseparable from eschatology. This requires that we distinguish different senses of dignity. In one sense we have dignity already, but in another sense we do not have dignity in all its fullness. There is both a present actuality and a future potentiality about human dignity. Both are essential to an adequate theology of dignity and holding the doctrine of creation and eschatol-

25. *Homilies on Philippians* 7, NPNF, series 1, vol. 13, p. 213.

26. ANF, vol. 4, p. 181.

ogy together shows us how the absolute or universal concept of human dignity must be kept always in relation to a relative or qualitative one.

A theology of creation gives us an absolute concept of dignity that bestows dignity on all, and there is no light or shade about it. However, this affirmation needs to be complemented by a qualitative concept of dignity that reflects the extent to which the potential that comes from being made in the image of God is or has been realized. The distinction between being made in the «image» of God and growing in his «likeness» has been used in this way. People differ in the extent to which they have realized the potential that comes from being created in the image of God. At the present time that fuller dignity to which we are all called, and for which we can hope, is more completely realized in some people than in others. All, however, are called to a fuller realization of the dignity that is part of God's purpose. People can thus live in the space created between the basic dignity that is given to them and the fuller dignity to which they are called. How this is experienced can make a crucial difference in our lives. The proper human experience of dignity depends on keeping open the axis between the dignity that we have already as gift and the fuller dignity that we are promised and toward which we are called. To see dignity solely as necessary property of human beings, as secular Enlightenment thought tends to do, is to lose touch with the eschatological promise that the dignity of humanity can become more of a reality. On the other hand, if dignity is seen entirely as something that might develop more fully in the future, with no sense that it is already in some basic sense present, there would be no constraints on current indignities. If the only concept of dignity that we can affirm in the political realm of life is the universal dignity of all as an inherent quality of every human being then it might be assumed that human dignity could be neither destroyed nor improved upon. Only if there is a sense that human dignity could become more of a reality than is presently the case can people be motivated toward a betterment of human conditions. This sense of dignity as something that remains to be realized can be seen as an invitation and a promise, a possibility that is held out to people, and to which they are invited to respond.