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Faith and Human Rights: Christianity and the Global Struggle for Human Dignity

Richard Amesbury and George M. Newlands

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008

127 pages, \$8.50 paperback

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

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

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

The next three chapters authored by Amesbury take a more systematic tone. The meaning of "rights" and the obligations that arise from them is unwrapped in a logical and easily understood

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

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