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Editor's Note

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EDITOR'S NOTE

All phenomena, especially those that are the products of the human imagination and action, have a genetic code, even if the precise delineations and movements are not always easily accessible. Our contemporary concerns over human rights are no exception. In an important sense, the historical roots of our preoccupation with the welfare of the "other" could be linked to the coming of all major religious faiths. Reasserting the potential human capacity for empathy, many religions, in one version or another, attempt to convey to their adherents that sympathetic obligation is a virtue, if not a responsibility to fellow human beings.

Hinduism, for instance, usually identified as the world's oldest religion, stresses in its great written texts more than three millennia past, the pivotal significance of earthly responsibilities to all human beings beyond self or primordial ties. In other words, selflessness and attention to the pain of others is a cardinal part of the practice of the faith. "Am I my brother's keeper?" is frontally declared in the first book, Genesis, of Judaism's Torah. Here, among the key attributes that determine a believer's relationship with God, is the embrace of the axiom that all human beings are at once one unit and each individual ought to be treated with the respect and care that is inherent in them. Deep esteem for the life of each person and benevolence toward the suffering "other" is a commandment of Buddhism. In fact, the great Buddha himself had declared that his mission was primarily this: to identify the source of human sorrow and to teach how to overcome it. In the Christian belief system, Jesus' message underscores the worth of all persons in front of God. Consequently, the Gospel instructs that a paramount duty for a believer is to honor other human beings and serve their needs with sacrificial compassion. For Islam, the core of the Qur'an calls for believers to work for and uphold justice and mercy.

Modern and secular thought has joined the ancient religions in the espousal of concern for the well-being of others. The accumulation of the destructions of the two World Wars in the twentieth century, the unforgettable Holocaust, and the cost of colonial subjugation triggered the creation of the United Nations Organization and its Charter in San Francisco in 1945. That discussion about war and peace was destined to soon touch other issues, such as equality and justice. Three years later, in 1948, the 183rd session of the United Nations General Assembly endorsed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The most pivotal proposition singles out the unacceptability of discrimination concerning "race, color, sex, language, religion, political and other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or social status." Moreover, the Declaration advocates security, education, and economic well-being. Together, the Declaration's negative and positive flanks add up to converge with the basic aspiration for "development" among the world's deprived communities and societies. This is what animates the undying clamor for transformations in the way local, national, and global institutions work and decisions are made.

The record of ancient religions, the University Declaration of Human Rights, and regional versions in living up to their principles is a mixed one. For religion, dogmatic claims on godly truth and a privileging of ways of being in the world, coupled with intimacy with earthly power, have left a contradictory record: ennobling pan-human experiences and harrowing sectarians cruelties. Our own epoch is full of examples on both registers. As for the Declaration and its variants, there has been some discernable agreement on a number of issues, such as the abolition of the death penalty, torture, intervention in the case of a state authorities killing its citizens, and the prosecution of those accused of using public power to commit mass murder of genocidal scale. But there is a problem here, too: the enforcement of international human rights when the most powerful states and their leaders disregard the code, are seen to act with unilateral violence, and destroy the lives of many people, including their own. This is the syndrome of the double standard and it haunts our world.

Perhaps the most acute challenge for the full realization of a global human rights regime comes back to the extension of the scope of what it covers. No doubt, political rights are still, and will always be, paramount. For where there is a paucity, if not absolute curtailment, of individual liberty, and repression rules, human life is stunted. But liberty without justice is bound to lead to the denudation of freedom and to trigger burning resentment. How, then, does one move toward an enhanced stage of engagement at a time in which the already dense interdigitation of universalism *and* difference is bound to accelerate.

Conor Foley writes:

A useful starting point would be to acknowledge that the conception of human rights western liberals have created, refined and prepackaged for export, is not the one in existence. A broader dialogue is needed for the ways in which respect for human dignity, personal freedom and

individual autonomy can be located in discussions of how to address the injustices caused by the imbalances of wealth and power in the world today. Combating extreme poverty requires economic growth, but since poverty and inequality are two of the most important underlying causes of conflict and humanitarian crises, human rights and humanitarian organizations have an important role to play in the arguments for economic justice.[1]

The 2010 Macalester International Roundtable revolved around "My Sister's and Brother's Keeper?: Human Rights in the Era of Globalization." The following three questions guided our deliberations:

- What are the *main* human rights concerns of the 21st century?
- What are the primary forces (and contexts) responsible for (congenial to) these issues, and why?
- In what specific ways could human rights be advanced and by whom?

Our main essayists, spearheaded by the keynote delivered by Philip Alston, as well as the respondents and open discussions that followed each session, underscored or implied, among others, five seminal points:

- That universal human rights has an axial value.
- That grave infringements and abuses or institutional incompetence/ brittleness are common in the Global South.
- That the powerful Global North flaunts or engages in selective application of the rules of the human rights regime.
- That the specter of "combined and uneven development" continues to bedevil the 21st century.
- That a combination of stiffening the promotion and implementation and enlarging the conversation about freedom, justice, and human worthiness is indispensable.

In 2012, the theme of the International Roundtable will be "Children of the World: The Dialectic of Promise and Vulnerability."

Notes

1. Conor Foley, *The Thin Blue Line: How Humanitarianism Went to War* (London: Verso, 2008). Thomas McCarthy articulates the challenge a tad differently:

> Since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, there has been a continuous broadening and deepening of 'human rights culture' across the globe and a proliferation of human rights institutions—such as international courts—and organizations—such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch—dedicated to monitoring and protesting egregious human rights violations everywhere. Beyond eliciting spontaneous reactions of horror and indignation at such violations, this culture and these institutions and organizations have shaped an expanding, mass-mediated, and digitally connected global public sphere concerned with the extension and protection of basic human rights. Transnational advocacy networks are thus able to pursue a 'politics of human rights' that frames and publicizes rights issues, mobilizes public opinion around them, forces them onto national and international agendas, and brings public pressure to bear on states and transnational organizations. That has proved to be an important source of transnational solidarity across sociocultural boundaries. At the same time, the growth of global solidarity has been inhibited by the tendency of many developed societies to emphasize civil and political rights over the economic and social rights stressed by many developing societies. As the rights discussion has expanded from a Western to a global discourse and become increasingly decentered in the process, the conflict of interpretation arising from this disagreement regularly blocks overlapping consensus and reasonable agreement.
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> Thomas McCarthy, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 235.

See also, *The Politics of Human Rights,* edited by Obrad Savíc (London: Verso, 1999); and Neil Middleton, *Humanitarian Assistance: Haiti and Beyond* (London: Seagull Books, 2010).

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