

Promoting Human Dignity and Human Rights
from an African Christian Perspective:

A Reflection on Luke 4:18-19 in the Context of Shrinking
Spaces of the Civil Society Based on the Experience of
Churches in Tanzania, Rwanda, and the Democratic
Republic of Congo

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Introduction

This chapter presents, in brief, the way African churches, especially in the eastern and central parts, contribute to the promotion of human dignity and human rights, both concepts of universal character but rooted in African tradition.

Normally, in a democratic country system, the promotion of human dignity is primarily the task of the government, designed in social projects, and carried out in the social programs of the government. This should include the education system on different levels, starting in the family. Churches as members of the civil society are then involved in the protection and promoting of these universal values, not only as fulfilling a social task, much more as responding to a divine call. This call is the prophetic mission of the church. However, church as a social organization may not always have the easiest task to operate in this regard. In that case, different contexts will show how the church can manoeuvre in a shrinking space in civic society.

Human Dignity and Human Rights in African Understanding

The African Consortium for Law and Religion Studies¹ has recently acknowledged the multidimensional and plural character of the concept of human dignity expressed as *Ubuntu* in the Nguni Bantu concept or *Utu* in the Kiswahili language. It is a fundamental societal, religious, cultural, and legal concept in Africa. The concept is also inclusive. Africans think of dignity not solely as an individual human characteristic or right but as a concept that implicates most important relationships in solidarity, including family, community, tribe, and nation. Human dignity is always in relationship with others. Such understanding involves human duties, gender considerations, and relationships with a strong sense of reciprocity. Human dignity is the recognition of the dignity of others. Therefore, an African perspective on dignity is outward looking, not just reflecting inward.

The consortium recognizes that human dignity is not an abstract concept. It is, rather, a concrete concern for basic human needs that must be satisfied to be fully human and to enjoy one's basic human dignity. This includes food, clothing, shelter, gainful employment, and the ability to care for oneself and one's family. Social and economic rights are the cornerstones of human dignity. Thus, violating human rights through mass killing, genocide, wars, looting, human trafficking, exploitation of children and women, forced migration and displacement, extreme poverty, and so on destroys human dignity.

The protection of human dignity is one of the state's obligations. This is carried out through the program of the government in social services, the health system, education and human capacitation, building infrastructures, distribution of justice, and security of people, a right and fair economy, and careering for ecology. Whenever the state fails to fulfil these tasks, structures of the civil society remind it. In this perspective, religious organizations play an important role in becoming the voice of the voiceless, called in the Christian context the prophetic mission of the church. The foundation of such a commitment of religious organizations is based not only on playing

1. African Perspectives on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere: An endorsement and elaboration of the Punta del Este Declaration on Dignity for Everyone Everywhere, by the African Consortium for Law and Religion Studies at its Seventh Annual Law and Religion in Africa Conference Law, Religion, and Environment in Africa. Gaborone, Botswana, 19-21 May 2019.

the watchman role, but also on the general belief shared by most Africans that God is the Creator who made human beings (in God's own image). Therefore, protecting human dignity is a reverence of the divine dimension existing in each (human) being, but also a profound respect to the ancestors, present and acting beyond the visible world. Beyond this common understanding, churches in Africa have more reasons to protect human dignity. This is based on the core mission as designed by Jesus Christ himself in the Bible, as we will show later.

The Shrinking Space of the Civil Society

Two concepts need to be clarified. First, the civil society space, and second, the shrinking space.

The civil society space

This concept is related to the place that civil society actors occupy within the society; the environment and framework in which civil society operates; and the relationships among civil society actors, the state, the private sector, and the general public. The civil society has many actors, among them churches, non-governmental organizations, schools and universities, human rights associations and activists, musicians, reporters and journalists, and more.

The concept of shrinking space

This concept refers to the restrictions, generally imposed by the state, on the freedom of action of civil society actors. These restrictions can be clearly expressed in a certain number of laws and regulations but can also be ingeniously done by security services without any official law, most of the time in the name of security. Many areas of public life can be touched by those restrictions, such as expressing a free opinion on public issues, making a critical comment on governmental action, reminding the state of its role, and challenging some decisions of the political rulers.

Different strategies can be used by the state or by the security services to restrict the civil society space, such as intimidation, arrest, judiciary persecution, exile, kidnapping, torture, enforced disappearance, killing, and verbal and physical threats. Human rights defenders, for example, can be attacked and accused of being in political opposition; they can also be accused of threatening national security or to promoting foreign or unwanted Western values. There is also a consistent use of laws and the criminal justice

system to deter human rights defenders, including detentions without charges, prosecution on false charges, or the unwarranted use of criminal laws against them.

The Prophetic Mission of the Church in Society: Voice of the Voiceless

Churches in Africa understand their social commitment as to accomplish the mission entrusted to the disciples by Jesus Christ in Luke 4:18-19, which is a reinterpretation of the prophecy of Isaiah 61:1-2:

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

In the interpretation of this text, African churches understand their mission as good news, meaning the restoration of human dignity of each and every one, and strive for it.

According to the historical background, Jesus was asked to read during the worship, a scripture prepared in the Jewish calendar. On that day, they had prepared Isaiah 61:1-5, where the prophet proclaimed God’s deliverance to the people of Israel in the year 650 BCE. At that time, the nation of Israel had been in exile in Babylon for over 70 years. Israel, who believed they were God’s elected, did not understand why God had cast them out and left them in the hands of their oppressors. Kings, priests, and other respected leaders were taken, enslaved, and humiliated. Then the prophet Isaiah (receiving a revelation from God about their deliverance) declared that God would change the condition of his people, that the oppressed today will be the masters of tomorrow. The deported will return to their homeland and the glory of Israel will be seen again. However, in the time of Jesus, the restoration has been just a story, because the land of Israel at that time (6–33 CE) was under the domination of the Roman Empire.

Then, when Jesus was asked to read the text in the synagogue of his village Nazareth, he interpreted this message of the prophet Isaiah as his own mission! He said: “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:21). Although people did not understand him, because for them Jesus was not the messiah, they were waiting for this prophecy to be accomplished, and his message connected the two contexts. Politically, the whole land of Israel

was under Roman rule, thus King Herod of the Jews had no real authority before the emperor Caesar. Caesar imposed heavy taxes on the people, who only became poorer and miserable slaves. The rich people could lend seeds to the poor people and then collect all their harvest to refund themselves. Many families became slaves because they could not pay their debts.

On the side of religion, the leaders demanded so many offerings and sacrifices that the courtyard of Jerusalem's temple was turned into a market for sacrificial animals as well as for foreign currency exchange.

On the social and gender aspects, women and gentiles (non-Jewish people) were greatly mistreated, viewed as unclean and unworthy. It might be remembered that a specific prayer was recited in the morning as following: "Praise the Lord who did not make me a gentile; who did not make me a woman; and who did not make me a slave. . ."² Such daily prayer shows how the dignity of a woman was not considered, as it will be elaborated through the woman's case study.

For all these reasons, Jesus decided to proclaim the good news, which restores the human dignity of all victims of oppression. This mission is visible in the way Jesus addresses political oppression, gender discrimination, moral deviation, socio-judiciary injustice, health issues, spiritual slavery and demonic possession, economical exploitation, and religious hypocrisy.

Jesus Restores the Human Dignity of a Woman: Case Study

The condition of women in the New Testament is characterized by socio-cultural marginalization. Just one element is to observe how women are mentioned: if she has not been privileged to be a queen, a princess, a mother of a very important person, a wife of a rich man, or a known virgin, her name doesn't count! She will be referred to according to her health challenge (like the woman who spills blood, the woman from whom seven demons were cast out) or her moral behaviours (the woman who pours oil, the Samaritan woman, the adulterous woman). Through these few examples, we can see how discrimination and stigma against women were common in Jesus' time. Women were not given all the rights they deserve. In the Jewish temple, women sat behind a wall. Hence, it was difficult for them to get a good religious education.

2. Talmud, Menachot 43b, <https://www.sefaria.org/Menachot.43b.18?lang=bi&with=Talmud&lang2=en>.