tion are key markers for human rights. Priority must be given to those most oppressed, excluded, discriminated against, or lacking in opportunities.

This was underlined in how Jesus proclaimed and embodied the new reign of God:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." (Lk 4:18-19)

God incarnate in Christ embodies self-giving, compassionate solidarity. Through the cross and resurrection, Christ decisively transforms the marginalization of those without rights, by fully identifying with them. Consequently, the Spirit of the Risen Christ is present throughout the created order, bringing possibilities for creative transformation wherever there is contempt for human life and denial of human rights.

In the end, therefore, what Christian faith can provide rights-based development work is an empowering sense of being able to imagine and live in the hope of a world different from the current realities of suffering, oppression and violence — i.e., "another world is possible!" – and to work tirelessly with others toward that goal.

KAREN L. BLOOMQUIST

Notes

[1] Elisabeth Gerle, "Conflicting Religious-Cultural Discourses of Human Rights in the World Today" in Karen L. Bloomquist (ed.), *Lutheran Ethics at the Intersections of God's One World*, *LWF Studies 02/2005* (Geneva: The Lutheran World Federation, 2005), p. 104.

[2] John Witte, "The Spirit of the Laws, the Laws of the Spirit: Religion and Human Rights in a New Global Era" in ax L. Stackhouse and Don S. Browning (eds), *The Spirit and the Modern Authorities*, (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2001), p. 82.

See also Peter N. Prove and Luke Smetters (eds), *Faith and Human Rights: Voices from the Lutheran Communion, LWF Documentation 51/2006* (Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press, 2006).

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"Thinking it over…" Issue #16

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Why a Faith Basis for Human Rights Matters

Many organizations today are pursuing development and advocacy work based on human rights. When church related organizations collaborate with them, as they can and must do, the tendency is to do so in terms that are devoid of references to faith. In some circumstances this is necessary, yet attention must also be given to the faith bases for why church related organizations engage in this work.

A positive yet ambiguous relationship

Christians and church related organizations engage in human rights work because they are grounded in an ethos and inspired by convictions and priorities of the Christian faith that nurture, guide and sustain this work. On the surface, and for the purpose of practical collaboration with others, this faith basis may not appear to make the work we do in this area that distinctive. But this multifaceted faith grounding, along with that of other faith traditions, can enrich, deepen, critique and bring in new dimensions and tensions, and sustain this work over the long haul.

Many twentieth-century developments in the area of human rights, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, have been strongly influenced if not inspired by Christians. Many recent theologians have given much attention to the link between contemporary human rights commitments and various Christian traditions. Yet because these traditions developed far earlier in history, and under much different circumstances than did Enlightenment inspired human rights understandings, we must be cautious of moving too directly from biblical and earlier Christian perspectives to current human rights understandings, especially in today's multi-religious and secular world. Human rights have developed through complex, interacting historical processes, informed by experiences of oppression and totalitarianism, injustice and violations of human rights. Yet human rights can be seen as rooted in and as the modern political fruits of ancient religious beliefs and practices.

Although human rights generally are consistent with biblical perspectives and priorities, they are not "owned" by Christians. Indeed, there has been an ambiguous historical record with regard to churches and human rights, such as using select passages of Scripture to deny equal human rights to women, or to justify the use of violence. At times, churches have been opposed to rather than promoters of basic human rights. Thus, sobering humility and ongoing critique are required: religious traditions and practices may need to be critiqued from human rights perspectives, and some (e.g., individualistic) human rights interpretations or applications may need to be critiqued from religious perspectives.

There must also be dialogical openness to what other religious traditions can bring to rights-based development work. Perspectives from other religious traditions become especially important, lest there be a gap between (often secular) European and religious traditions prominent in other parts of the world.

"Many traditions with origins in Asia, especially Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and a variety of traditional religions (e.g., in Africa) cannot imagine or accept a system of rights that excludes religious dimensions because religion is part of the totality of life. Religious worldviews frequently offer a more profound language, based as they are on the transcendent. Religious traditions not only offer resistance to greed, the religion of secular modernism, but also inspiration and communal responsibility."[1]

It is crucial that there be ongoing interreligious and intercultural dialogue about these matters, especially as they are enmeshed in what sometimes are conflicting cultural realities. "In a number of current religious and cultural conflicts, human rights are as much the problem as the solution."[2] Cultures can have both liberating and oppressive aspects. This is why human rights are such key reminders that it is not cultures in themselves but the human beings in them who are entitled to respect.

Shaped, inspired and guided by the biblical witness

At the same time, as Christian-based organizations, we must be clear about the grounds on which we pursue rights-based development work, and the added values or dimensions these faith commitments entail. This begins most fundamentally with the common Scripture we share. Scripture provides overarching narratives that help to (a) nurture a human rights ethos or "culture," (b) reiterate the priorities and expand the scope of this work, (c) remind us of critical balances or tensions, and (d) inspire and sustain us with a hope that goes beyond short-term successes or failures.

What is central is how the Bible bears witness from beginning to end to God's creating, redeeming and sustaining activities. God creates out of nothing, delivers from bondage, defends the vulnerable, strengthens the weak, and yearns for abundant life, peace and justice for all of creation.

In creation, **God gives *all* human beings a dignity** (created in the image of God, Gen 1:27). This is at the heart of what motivates human rights work. Human dignity is first and foremost in relation to God. This basic dignity must be vigorously defended and upheld in the face of all those forces that would compromise, violate or deny who human beings are. This dignity is multifaceted: it has to do with basic spiritual as well as physical and social needs. It includes the "bread" needed to sustain life on earth, the "bread" that is the right of everyone in community with others, and the "bread" of heaven. What it means to be human transcends narrow legalistic or reductionistic ways of viewing human beings and their rights, and can be enriched with perspectives from various religious traditions. Thus, political, civil, economic, social, cultural and religious rights must all be upheld.

Permeating biblical and theological traditions are understandings of human beings that involve dialectical relationships between the individual and the community, between freedom/liberty and obligations/responsibilities, between human dignity and sinfulness, between human beings and the rest of creation. For example, individual rights should not be overemphasized at the expense of community, or social order and obligations at the expense of individual freedom. These tensions need to be kept in balance in human rights work, depending on the specific context and circumstances at stake.

Justice and compassion are central to what God is about, and to what we are called to pursue. Justice is grounded in the righteousness of God, who delivers the oppressed from bondage (Exodus 20:2). Seeking justice implies looking out for the rights of all people, and compassion implies protecting and caring for those who lack rights. The two dimensions go together. The repeated call in Scripture to care for "strangers, widows and orphans" – to reach out in compassion that reflects God's love – necessarily involves laws that seek to ensure their just treatment. In Hebrew Scripture this is based not on the "rights" of individuals but on the obligations and duties of the community. Because order-restoring laws can themselves become oppressive, justice must continually be infused with the heart of compassion. Thus, the prophet cries out:

"Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that the widow may be your spoil, and that you may make the orphans your prey!" (Isa 10:1-2).

When some live in dire poverty, or lack basic freedoms, this is an assault on the just order God intends. God is just and human beings are to be God's agents of justice in the world. Laws are for the sake of restoring a humane quality of life to all, so that they might enjoy **dignity, equality and participation.** From a theological perspective, poverty is far more than a condition of entitlement failure. A just and compassionate social order in which human flourishing can occur is constructed from the bottom up, as Hannah proclaimed: "God raises up the poor from the dust…the needy from the ash heap…to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor" (I Samuel 2: 8a). Dignity, equality and participa-