

# HUMAN RIGHTS AND CHRISTIAN FAITH

AN ESSAY BY

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I want to talk to you very briefly about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Two months ago, in the ceremony of the laying of the corner-stone of the Permanent Headquarters of the United Nations, at which President Truman spoke, it was interesting that a copy of this Declaration, together with a copy of the Charter of the United Nations, was deposited inside that corner-stone. Those of us who had something to do with the drawing up of this document were exceedingly happy to behold such a public recognition of its importance as one of two foundations of the United Nations.

The work on human rights is the one point in the total activity of the United Nations where the ultimate ideological issues are sharpest. What is at stake here is the determination of the nature of man, the exact emphasis that you wish to place on this or that side of him, the balanced system of all these emphases. The superficial thinkers of the nineteenth century, with rare although outstanding exceptions, believed that the age of belief was over, and that evolution, having at last emancipated man of the possibility of any dogma or faith (which they always somehow associated with superstition) has once and for all rid him of any possible future wars of religion. Hardly two generations rolled by this dogmatic faith of the nineteenth century when human conditions so evolved that the fiercest clashes in the realm of ideas and ultimate beliefs seem to have taken possession of the world. Today men fight precisely because they disagree on their own interpretation of themselves. Man, you and I in person, our origin, our nature, our rights, our destiny—these are the great questions of the age. And these questions are nowhere more dramatically discussed than in the United Nations debate on human rights. For here responsible representatives of all the effective cultures of the world vigorously contend every comma and every shade of meaning. Nothing is more repaying to the thoughtful student of the present ideological situation than to read and ponder, in all their prolonged, dramatic richness, the records of our debates on this question. Here you have the exciting drama of man seeking to grasp himself.

## THE INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETY

Of the ultimate questions raised in debate I wish to concentrate on three, because they seem to me to be at the basis of every other question. There is first the problem of the proper relationship between the individual and society. This raises obviously the problem of duties. Many delegations asked whether we should not balance every right with a corresponding duty. In the text finally adopted, however, duties are mentioned only once, namely in Article 29, and then in the most general terms. This is the text of paragraph one of that Article:

“Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.” Two important matters are to be noted about this statement. It is true I am told I have duties to the community; but these duties are not *simpliciter*, they are not absolute. I have duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of my personality is possible. My duties are not to any community; they are only to the community in which my personality can be developed. Then also, it is not *any* development of my personality that is envisaged; even the *full* development of my personality is not enough: this *full* development must also be free. “Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.” Thus in the one instance in which duties are mentioned, the supremacy of man over all society and all social claims is perfectly recognized. Society, including its supreme organized form, the state, is for the sake of man—the full, free, personal man—and not conversely.

It will now be objected: But this is anarchism, this is extreme individualism. Is not our trouble in modern times that the individual is making too many claims on society, that he places himself in the center of things and wishes everything and everybody to serve him, that he is deficient in social responsibility? Should it not also be instilled into him that he has duties to his fellow men, that he should give at least as much as he should receive? True he has his rights, but society also has hers.

The answer to this objection is that we are here dealing with the rights of man as man, and not with the rights of society or the state. The problem of human rights arose in recent years precisely because society and the state trespassed upon man, to the extent, in totalitarian states, of choking him altogether. In our formulation we are therefore called upon to correct the excesses precisely of statism and socialism. The right amount of anarchism and individualism is exactly what statism and socialism need. It is not that we find ourselves at present in a lawless jungle with every man brutally seeking his own individual advantage without any organized lines of relation and authority, and as a result we are called upon, so to speak, to restore order and authority by reminding men of their duties and obligations. It is rather that we find ourselves today in a situation, all the world over, in which man’s simple, essential humanity—his power to laugh and love and think and change his mind, in freedom—is in mortal danger of extinction by reason of endless pressures from every side: governmental regulations and controls, social interferences, the maddening noises of civilization, the sheer multiplicity and crowding in of events as a result of the contraction of the world, the dizziness of his mind from the infinity of material things to which he must attend.

Under this external social and material pressure man is about to be completely lost. What is needful therefore is to reaffirm for him his essential humanity, to remind him that he is born free and equal in dignity and rights with his fellow men, that he is endowed by

nature with reason and conscience, that he cannot be held in slavery or servitude, that he cannot be subjected to arbitrary arrest, that he is presumed innocent until proved guilty, that his person is inviolable, that he has the natural right to freedom of thought, conscience, religion and expression, and so on down the list of proclaimed rights. It is this reaffirmation, if only he heeds it, that might still save him from being dehumanized. For society and the state under modern conditions can take perfect care of themselves; they have advocates and sponsors on every side. Their rights are in good hands. It is man, the real, existing, anxious, laughing, free and dying man, who is in danger of becoming extinct. It is man who is the unprotected orphan, the neglected ward, the forgotten treasure. And therefore it is good that the Declaration has not lost sight of its main objective: to proclaim man's irreducible humanity, to the end that he may yet recover his creative sense of dignity and reestablish his faith in himself.

## FREEDOM AND SECURITY

The proper balance between freedom and security is another fundamental presupposition of our enterprise. To the Communists, security came first even if that should mean the loss of freedom; to others, freedom came first even if that should mean a certain degree of insecurity; still others believed that freedom and security need not conflict with one another, that each could be assigned its proper place in the total essence of man! Man's social and economic needs are fully recognized in the so-called social and economic articles at the end. These include the right to social security, to work, to favorable conditions of work, to just remuneration for one's self and one's family, to rest and leisure, to education and to the enjoyment of the arts. Surely there is no full life without these rights. But all this socialism and materialism is more than balanced on the other hand by the earlier articles which speak of freedom and dignity, of reason and conscience, of the inviolability of one's person, privacy and property, and of freedom of thought, conscience, expression, association and assembly.

The problem here was how to stem the rising tide of materialism. This is something much deeper than Marxism or present-day communism. It is man's natural tendency to flee his personal responsibility and to seek his rest in the guarantee of external things, whether they be his bank account, or his property, or the guarantee of his society or his government.

It is flight from the Creator, in whom alone there is security, in the direction of creatures and things. I submit that this flight is universal today, and that Russia is only carrying it to its absolute logical conclusion. People everywhere seek their livelihood rather than the source of their life; they want to secure for themselves the endless variety of material comforts rather than the simple few virtues of the mind and spirit. The Charter speaks of "higher standards of living;" it never speaks of higher standards of feeling, or valuation, or thinking,

or spiritual perception. There is a tendency then to interpret man in terms of material and economic conditions. The meaning of the old choice between gaining the whole world and losing one's own soul is practically lost. The concupiscence of things has overwhelmed the soul. In the genesis of the Declaration we had to resist the seductiveness of security at every turn. I believe we ought to have resisted it more. But the Declaration does retain, I think, as much of the original integrity and freedom of man as is humanly possible under the terrific materialistic pressures of the age.

## NATURE AND ORIGIN

The third ultimate issue was more implied than debated. It relates to the nature and origin of human rights. Where do they come from? What is their Metaphysical status? Are they arbitrarily conferred upon me by some external visible agency, such as my state or parliament or the United Nations, so that this visible power can conceivably one day withdraw them from me at will, without thereby violating a higher law? Or do they belong to my essence, so that the function of any external visible power with respect to them is not to create and constitute them but only to recognize and respect them, and so that if in any way it violates them it will thereby trespass against the natural law of my humanity?

This is clearly the problem of natural versus positive law. If these rights are the mere product of positive law, namely of law as it happens to be at a particular stage in evolution, then clearly, since positive law changes, my rights, and therewith my very human nature, will change with it. But if, on the other hand, these rights express my nature as a human being, then there is a certain compulsion about them; they are metaphysically prior to any positive law, and any such law must either conform to them or else be by nature null and void. Either man has an external essence which can be grasped and expressed by reason, or he dissolves without any remainder into the general flux.

I need hardly tell you that the founders of the United States, deriving heavily from that great father of Anglo-Saxon political thoughts, John Locke, believed in natural law, and endeavored as best they could to make positive law answerable to the law of nature. Any other view of things would have seemed utterly absurd to them. But today the mood—as witness for instance Roscoe Pound—is all positivistic. The vision of something fixed, eternal, natural, restful, is utterly blurred. I hold this change, from rest to change, is of the essence of the great spiritual crisis which is gripping the world today.

And yet one can read in the doctrine of the Declaration a partial and implicit return to the law of nature. I can show that the language used in the Preamble and in Article I, particularly

the words “recognition,” “inherent,” “inalienable,” “born,” and “endowed,” all heavily smack of the doctrine of the law of nature.

Even this modest amount of traditional doctrine had to be established in the teeth of terrific opposition. The return to the great positive tradition which founded not only America but also the whole of Western European civilization is not complete. The individual human soul as something eternal and infinitely precious, as capable of scaling the heights or plunging into the abyss, as wholly above every material and social determination, as capable of unbelievable transfigurations upon the touch of transcendent love and trust—it is this authentic doctrine of man to which we must wholeheartedly return if we are to be saved.

But such a return is impossible without Jesus Christ, namely, without His return to us. What can the United Nations and its abstract Declarations or even Covenants do without Him? Supposing we produce the finest document or enter into the most solemn pact covering Human Rights; you think they will have an effect on history and man’s dignity will be restored and preserved if the Lord of history does not bless them? There have been heartening but faint signs lately that perhaps He has not completely forsaken this sinful world. Throughout the Western world men show signs of greater wistfulness in regard to Him. Books with Christian themes are best sellers. Toynbee is a best seller; his philosophy of history is humbling people and making them think. The theology of Barth and Niebuhr is no longer a scandal. I understand church membership has risen to new records. The movement for unity among the Protestant Churches proceeds apace. There is also the great ecumenical movement, Amsterdam, the World Council of Churches. The demand for ministers of Christ is greater than the possible supply; most theological seminaries are full, and there are plans for enlarging or renovating them, or opening new centers of religious study. To the Roman Catholic world the coming year is a great year of rejoicing and prayer and consecration and pilgrimage. I understand there are plans that the Protestant churches make a similar mighty effort in the preaching of the Gospel. At the turn of the half-century all this is good news for those who see no meaning in life apart from Jesus Christ. It is the prayer of those who unworthily carry His wondrous Cross that these signs of His return to us be multiplied a hundredfold. I trust that Western Christianity, when and if its revival has really set in, will not forget the old and exceedingly suffering Greek Orthodox Church. I trust it will remember it in its prayers and love and ministration. Parenthetically, I trust you shall not forget the tribulations of Christian existence in the Near East. For, after all, my friends, it was the Greek Orthodox Church that, in Christ’s inscrutable design, was chosen to face one onslaught after another from the East. Outwardly, it has failed, but I assure you Christ is there in its midst. For two thousand years it has served as a buffer between East and West, a position that I would not wish even for my enemies. And when the East, when the whole of Asia, is rising

again today—and it is safe to predict that the next fifty years will constitute the spiritual battle of Asia—I trust that Western Christianity will not meet it with political and economic and military cleverness alone. I trust that you will mean for Asia much more than economic and political accommodation; for that is precisely what the Greek Orthodox Church did. In your decisive confrontation with Asia and the East during the next half-century, everything will depend on whether you shall forget the foolishness of the Cross.