

# THE SPIRITUAL IMPLICATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS COVENANT

AN ESSAY BY  
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In his *Adventures of Ideas* the late Professor distinct Whitehead teaches that the individual human soul, as a distinct substance with a peculiar origin and an immortal destiny, is a distinctive Platonic Christian inheritance. He remarks that this doctrine has more moulded the history of the West than any other single doctrine. In his own metaphysical construction Whitehead has no place for this conception of the human soul. Revolting against every notion of substance, he defines the soul as “a personal society of occasions.” In this radical subordination of the soul to “experience,” to “the universe,” to “society,” to “the flux,” Whitehead typifies his age.

The deepest formulation of the significance of the present international activity in the field of human rights is that it is a faint echo, on the international plane, of a spiritual reaction against the modern dissolution of the human soul. We are trying in effect, knowingly or unknowingly, to go back to the Platonic Christian tradition which affirms man’s original, integral dignity and immortality.

The one great modern phenomenon is the rise of the masses, the destruction of hierarchy, the levelling down of distinction and structure. The term “the masses” is here employed in an ontological sense: it refers to the kind of being and valuation of the masses. This rise is necessarily also a revolt, and as such it was accurately described and predicted by Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky, and in our own days no one has been more sensitive to it than Ortega y Gasset and Heidegger. The phenomenon of “das Man” in Heidegger’s “*Sein und Zeit*” is the most wonderful philosophical description I know of this characterless, dark, distracted, gossipy, irresponsible, self-lost, impersonal, undecisive and unauthentic spirit of the masses. The present issue of human rights may be interpreted as an attempt at restoring the sense of responsible, authentic, personal dignity to the individual human being.

The causes of this rising revolt can be investigated on several different levels. So far as material, economic and social conditions constitute real causation, the masses have rebelled and risen as a result of the industrial revolution. It can be shown that as the masses rose, man, humanity necessarily declined. When you become an atom in a massive ocean of identically like atoms, without structure, without distinction, without ontological differentiation of function, then you lose your sense of essential, human inalienable, human individuality. The

international work of human rights and fundamental freedoms is a faint effort to recover this lost individuality, to the end that the individual human person should realize his own natural dignity, namely the rights and liberties with which he, as a man, is endowed by nature.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is a statement of principle. Even as such it is not perfect. It is not perfect because it is not the creation of a single master mind. If a Plato or a Saint Thomas or a Leibniz were to be assigned the task of elaborating such a document, it would have come out almost a perfect construction, aesthetically, logically and from the point of view of adequacy; but then it would not have the effectiveness and universal appeal that our present Declaration has. The loss in rational perfection is compensated by the gain in universal interest. For it is precisely part of the tender attention to individuality to allow that if a representative should be in a position to claim as his own a comma, or a semi-colon, or a whole text, or a basic idea, the Declaration would mean much more to his country and people. Its perfectionist critics care more for the purity of the idea than for the compulsion of immediate fact.

Already the Declaration, not yet five months old, has had an interesting career. When Vishinsky and Manuilsky on the one hand, and at least three powerful conservative groups in the United States on the other, join in vehemently denouncing this document, I believe it is safe to conclude it must possess peculiar virtues of its own. In important international debates it has been significantly appealed to a score of times.

But the crisis of the Declaration is the projected Covenant. It is there that our professions and the professions of our Governments will be put to the test. Are we prepared to join with others not only in the elaboration of principle but also in the establishment of law? This is the real test of our moral courage and fundamental convictions. The canon of security, which is the North Atlantic treaty, is an external, albeit absolutely necessary, framework; it cries for supplementation by an organon of human existence drawn from the deepest persuasions of the cumulative, positive Graeco-Roman-Christian, Western tradition. Only then would the Western community feel really secure. For security is not safety from physical attack, but the strength of the spirit knowing and being in the truth, overcoming, at least potentially, every falsehood and every error, and unafraid of, because already triumphant over Satan and death. I believe such positive strength of spirit is the authentic patrimony of the Western world.

It would be tragic if some of those who led at the stage of the Declaration should falter now at the stage of the Covenant. Such faltering need not reflect on them personally; it is rather the moral expression of the stubborn political realities. It signifies that the socio-political situation does not admit of the passage of ideas into law and thence into fact. But this is indeed part of the great crisis. Can Western civilization, which contains at its core, as I believe, the truest reality of human dignity, recover that dignity in fact? Is it so encumbered

and overwhelmed by its own accretions and distractions that it simply cannot bind itself by international law to the active realization of a well-articulated, true conception of man? What else is it doing if it is not doing this? To say that separate, silent realization without international codification is sufficient, is to do violence to the rational nature of man: it is already to derogate from his dignity. For if there is truth, we are by nature destined to know it and to articulate it and to share it. And thus either you despair of truth, the deep truth of man, or, if you know it, you must lift it to the lucid form of ideas and share it with others in fact. This means, so far as the problem of man is concerned, a Covenant of Human Rights. In the fact of much hedging and hesitation one is often tempted to think that the truth, which is integrally there, is nevertheless hidden from the view of the Western mind.

Now politics is by nature the sphere of compromise and calculation. A certain degree of untruth and impurity and insincerity must needs cling to the politician. He must carry it as a chastening cross. It will be understood and forgiven only in confession. Thus the full affirmation of man in his truth cannot come in the political sphere. The crisis of human rights consists therefore precisely in the fact that politics is meddling in a field that belongs more properly to the moral and prophetic consciousness. Politics should follow: it should not lead. When, contrary to nature, it is leading in these fundamental matters, then there is something the matter with the Church. For I do not believe the Church, which has the full deposit of truth, is leading enough in this field. There is certainly preoccupation with trivial problems when the greatest problem of the age, namely whether man can still remain man, with his freedom and laughter and joy and reason and love, is not sufficiently faced by the only agency that can really face and solve it. Politics does not really care; but if the care of God is not itself made potently manifest, then man, and therewith the politician himself, is completely lost.

Either there is a common morality about man which can be codified and not only respected but also actually observed under a rule of law, or we are on the verge of chaos. The proposed Covenant is a symptom of the decay, not a cure. What can arrest and reverse the process of decay is certainly not international machinery, but the spirit of God once again mightily breaking forth through the hearts of men. As in every crisis throughout the long record of human misery, the Church of Christ is the only real answer.

Let the Church therefore be the Church, one, holy, catholic and Apostolic, and the rights of man will be both proclaimed and realized. I yearn and groan for nothing as I do for the unity of the Body of our Lord. In that holy unity alone is man in all his possibilities completely revealed. What a pale and miserable phantom is all our activity for human rights by comparison with the humanity already achieved for all of us in Jesus Christ! Whatever we do with our human covenants, surely He is able to keep His Covenant with us.