

Preface

International Research on Religion and Human Rights

After the catastrophes of two world wars, three totalitarian systems, fascism, Nazism and communism, in the world, especially in Western civilization, the idea and awareness of the need for stronger and legally codified protection of human rights has developed to the fullness of realizability. The idea that every human being, by virtue of being a human being, besides any other attributes and categories, has inalienable human rights, and that these must be protected in the legal practice of contemporary societies, developed over a long period of time mainly in the Western cultural milieu. Finally, it came to full bloom on the graves of the glittering bloody twentieth century and slowly began to enter into practice. A strong development of human rights grew out of the ruins of World War II. People can be violent against others and states can be violent against other states, but the lesson of Nazism and Stalinism was that states can exercise violence against their citizens. People can be victims of the violence of their government. The modern face of human rights is that individuals have to be protected against the infringement of the state. Individuals may and can claim a number of freedoms even when this is directed against the superior power of the state.

The history of human rights is much older and dates back to antiquity. Many religions claim that the idea of human rights has been part of their doctrine from the beginning. Christianity refers to Paul's idea in the Letter to the Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus". In Islam, Mohammed's teaching brought a new perspective on human dignity whereby elements of human rights have been developed hand in hand with the blossoming of Islam. Certainly one cannot trace the modern concept of human rights to any particular religion; throughout history the relationship between religion and human rights has been an ambivalent one and in some cases continues to be so. This is what makes research on this subject so important and relevant.

What we are fundamentally interested in is the relationship between human rights and religiosity today. And this shall be discussed in our study, naturally taking into

account other processes that we believe are relevant to understanding the development of human rights and their connection with religiosity in contemporary Europe.

Somewhat in parallel with the development of the legal codification of human rights was the development of the idea of a united Europe carried by precisely this awareness that we need to protect against potential future decent into the absurdity of war that threatened to destroy entire nations and did destroy many cultural assets created by preceding generations. The promotion of human rights and the idea of European unification are two parallel processes that can be viewed independently, yet it is also important to bear in mind that the two processes significantly influence each other. Especially in the creative, productive stage of the promotion of human rights in the second half of the twentieth century which is of particular interest to us here. In the beginning of the strong development of human rights, in the mid-twentieth century, human rights were interpreted creatively with the power of promotion and the belief that their application would enable the final liberation of people and the protection of human dignity. However, it very quickly became clear that the implementation of this noble humanitarian idea is not as simple as it seemed initially. We very quickly found ourselves in a situation in which human rights can be perverted, can become, instead of the power of liberation of man, the power to maintain the status quo, where a privileged minority or group legitimizes its status, now no longer in the name of the people, the nation, the party—but in the name of human rights, so that the promotion of human rights becomes a tool for the maintenance of privilege and not the promotion of liberation of the potential of each individual human being. Further multiplication of human rights in the second and third generation runs the risk that this leads to their inflation, often times to collision as well, and the impossibility of legal codification and real application due to a lack of resources, both material, and even more so, social capital, because in the fierce struggle for the promotion of an ever increasing number of rights we lose the idea of the rights of the individual and reach a position of re-concentration of power through a new framework of legitimacy.

The question can be raised of whether human rights as a powerful liberational idea and movement of the twentieth century has lost its heuristic fertility and become another used up political outburst of the New Age, as are the ideas of nation, racism, colonialism, and communism. Or do human rights still have a liberating force that can help real endangered individuals and vulnerable groups of people and that does not represent the legitimatization of the privileged and ignorance of the disadvantaged?

At the first level of interpretation of the realization of human rights, arguments could be found for both theses: that they have the power of liberation of man and the protection of human dignity, and that they have lost this power and become a simple contemporary legitimizing basis of power relations in a society where human rights, in the name of human rights, are flagrantly violated and destroyed, now without the possibility of departure from the situation of vulnerability as vulnerability comes from the framework of legitimacy from which liberation should come. This duality of the realization of human rights in real life practices should be borne in mind in an attempt at scientific valuation of human rights in order for us to avoid seeing what

we want to see and not what is as it is, and what this reveals to us if we have the courage to face reality. This is the only way that the creative potential of these great ideas can be liberated to be able to liberate us.

In order to be able to do this, a series of human rights related research needs to be carried out, from the exploration of their roots, both secular as well as religious, to their concrete implementation, particularly taking into account the amount of power held by those who label and by those who are labelled as “vulnerable” or as “threatening”. We believe that this research will contribute to the rediscovery and liberation of the power of human rights in the early twenty-first century.

Our study comes out at the 100 year anniversary of the beginning of World War I, a vast slaughterhouse of nations and huge catastrophe in which, as in any war, there were violations of basic human rights. In this study we have linked two social phenomena: human rights and religiosity. The twentieth century could also be called a century of secularization, at least in Europe. Secularization theories were dominant in the mid-1960s and 1970s of the twentieth century, and it seemed that the future of humanity would be a future without religion, or a future reduced to religion as folklore but without any real impact on people’s lives. However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s a so-called religious revival began to be seen, particularly among young people and by the end of the century religion was being taken seriously as a relevant factor of social life. Since 9/11, religion has been back on the public agenda and the question raised of whether religion functions as a social force or a source of tensions.

What interests us here is what impact does religiosity have on human rights? Liberational or suppressive? And in which direction can we expect this relationship to develop? In order to be able to grasp this relationship we undertook two separate but synergetic studies: at the initial level, research by experts from individual countries which brings a description of the state of human rights and neuralgic points that on this basis are anticipated in individual societies. On the other hand, preparations have been undertaken for the execution of specific empirical research on the relationship of human rights and religiosity, and this on a population of high school students, in order to be able to observe the actual situation in society with respect to the questions posed. For the target group we chose youth. Why? Because this population is a sort of “litmus test” that does a good job of illustrating social trends for us, and on the basis of insight into their value systems and attitudes toward specific issues, in this case, human rights and religiosity, it is possible to gain an indication of the likely directions of development, and, which is also important, an indication of where one could intervene in order to reach the desired effect of liberation of the liberating power of human rights.

The articles in this book have their origin in a conference held in December 2012 in Würzburg, Germany. The authors met there to lay the foundation of the research project “Religion and Human Rights”.¹ The lectures given there covered topics such as: Which positions on human rights in general and in particular rights are represented by the churches/religions in their respective countries; how and which hu-

¹ See www.rhr.theologie.uni-wuerzburg.de.

man rights issues are discussed and which rights are under pressure; what are the relations or tensions between churches/religions and government/state regarding human rights and which rights are especially relevant for young people and which relate to issues of their life-world experiences respectively? The general structure of this book is based on these questions. Considering the diverse situations in the involved countries, the authors each have their own priorities.

The projected time frame for this research project is scheduled until 2017. The purpose of the empirical study is to determine any connections between religion and human rights regarding the attitudes of adolescents in their respective countries.

The general research question therefore is: What are the attitudes among the student population towards human rights and what is the impact of their religious convictions and practices on these attitudes? The aim is to discover theoretically and socially relevant relations between religious convictions and practices and attitudes towards human rights, to detect the direction in these relations in terms of the impact of religion on human rights attitudes, to formulate theoretically and empirically legitimate hypotheses about the impact of religion on human rights attitudes to be tested in future research and to elaborate conclusions for advancing human rights culture among European populations, especially human rights education.

Those authors who already have the empirical data required for the study (surveys among 15–18 year old students) have presented them in their articles. Comprehensive empirical studies will be presented over the next few years. This book presents the introductory “mapping of the scene”.

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