Global Christian Networks for Human Dignity

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Christianity carries in its DNA the radical notion of universal human dignity, rooted in the theological view that all are made in the image and likeness of God (*Imago Dei*). To be sure, Christians and Christian-influenced societies fall short of this ideal, sometimes egregiously so. But the idea of the surpassing worth of all persons loved by God can serve as a powerful challenge for Christians to address affronts to human dignity.[1]

Today, we see notable global campaigns against slavery, violence, exploitation, poverty and disease—all heavily infused by Christian actors and institutions. The reason is this: the momentous globalisation of Christianity marries the idea of dignity with the growing capacities of transnational networks focused on global poverty, AIDS, human trafficking, religious persecution, displacement and war. These Christian networks, as we will see, play an invaluable if unheralded role on the global stage in human rights advocacy, humanitarian succour and peacemaking.

The idea of universal human dignity came into prominence in the late Roman Empire when Christianity began to offer a broad critique of common practices that we now see as unjust, cruel, or exploitative—such as slavery, sexual coercion and indifference to the poor. It was in these arenas that the gulf between Christian dignity and societal practices seemed most glaring and demanded a response, however haltingly.[2] Today, this Christian DNA reaches across the globe, magnified by considerable resources and unparalleled transnational linkages.

One of the driving factors in the emergence and clout of international Christian networks has been the tectonic shift of the Christian population to the developing nations of the Global South. Whereas in 1900, 80 per cent of Christians lived in Europe and North America, now at least 60 per cent of all Christians can be found in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[3] This continuing trend nests the church amidst poverty, exploitation, war, persecution and displacement. International mission and development networks, in turn, channel awareness of these conditions to lay believers and policy makers in the West.

Another development is the expansion of global communication and travel, which draw grassroots constituencies into international engagement. Lay Americans meet visiting foreign religious leaders in their churches; they communicate via e-mail with counterparts around the world; and over a million believers a year travel on mission trips to work on humanitarian projects, often side by side with fellow believers in poor nations.[4]

What Western mission travelers discover is that they are not sent to spread the gospel among the heathen but to work alongside fellow Christians whose depth and vibrancy of faith inspires them. Wanting to support their suffering brothers and sisters in Christ, they become advocates for public policy initiatives to address poverty, disease and exploitation. They become contributors to NGOs, form campus groups to fight trafficking or write their members of Congress about AIDS funding or debt relief.

With this framework in mind, let us examine illustrations of how the Christian concept of dignity becomes instantiated through modern global networks.

Global Christian Networks for Human Dignity
Written by Allen D. Hertzke

Christian Development Networks and Global Poverty

As historian Kyle Harper remarked, 'On no other social issue does the Christian gospel provide such complete and unambiguous marching orders' as the problem of poverty. Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming good news to the poor and liberty for the oppressed, and his parable of the Good Samaritan demands that his followers see any hurting person as a neighbour they are called upon to love. The Christian mandate reaches its pinnacle in Matthew 25's depiction of the Day of Judgment, in which the blessed inherit the kingdom because they succoured the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the stranger and the prisoner. Indeed, the faithful are called upon to see Christ himself in the faces of the poor, the marginalised and the exploited.

For those engaged in Christian humanitarian ministries, this mandate breathes with special urgency as they work among the world's most destitute people—vulnerable to famine, disease, violence, exploitation and displacement. Indeed, extensive interviews with leaders of Christian non-government organisations (NGOs) and indigenous local staff reveal how deeply animated they are by Matthew 25 and the Good Samaritan.[5] The gospel mandate also calls forth the formidable lay generosity that generates multi-billion dollar resources for the growing network of Christian NGOs that support emergency relief, health care, education, agricultural initiatives and economic advancement.

An enumeration of the major Christian NGOs suggests their range and depth: Adventist Relief and Development Agency, American Friends Service Committee, Caritas International, Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, Compassion International, Habitat for Humanity, Jesuit Refugee Services, Lutheran World Relief, Mennonite Central Committee, Mercy Corps, Samaritan's Purse, World Concern, World Hope International, World Relief and World Vision, among others.

While initiated in the United States and Europe, these Christian NGOs have become truly global enterprises, with international boards, operations through regional and national affiliates in a hundred-plus countries and international staffs of up to 10,000. In addition, these organisations have undergone what Andrew Natsios describes as decolonialisation, the process of turning over control of field programmes to people in the beneficiary countries.[6] Today, the vast bulk of the personnel of Christian NGOs are indigenous people living amidst suffering or exploited people.

Impressive in scope, sophistication, on-the-ground reach, these groups fill a crucial niche in global development. Indeed, the major development programs operated by the United Nations, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the European Union routinely contract with Christian NGOs to implement local projects or deliver famine relief.[7]

This strategic position enables Christian NGOs to exercise creative leverage in high-level policy circles. With some of the best indigenous networks in developing nations, they generate valuable information on emerging problems and possible remedies. In turn, their global linkages and elite governmental access equips them to convey information to high-level policy makers.

Global Christian networks, for example, have propelled the ongoing effort to relieve debts burdening impoverished nations. Taking inspiration from the 'Year of Jubilee' in Hebrew scripture in which debts were forgiven, Christian leaders and NGOs provided theological inspiration and practical lobby muscle in the campaign to write off debts by lender nations, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. In 2000, when the Jubilee campaign sought funding from the US Congress to leverage further action by international institutions and other nations, Christian lobbyists persuaded conservative legislators normally sceptical of foreign aid to back the appropriation.[8]

The nexus of global Christian networks and US foreign policy also came into play in the development of the president's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), which was launched in 2003. Christian development organisations such as World Vision and Catholic Relief Services saw the devastating impact of HIV/AIDS first-hand, especially in Africa, and had begun developing their own relief programs in the 1990s. In addition, many lay members learned about the AIDS crisis in Africa as a result of the growing number of mission trips sponsored by American congregations. Employing the access they enjoyed with President George W. Bush, evangelical leaders joined with

Global Christian Networks for Human Dignity

Written by Allen D. Hertzke

Catholics and Jewish groups to lobby the president on AIDS, and he ultimately made it a signature issue. From the launch of the PEPFAR initiative in 2004, AIDS funding more than tripled. The program succeeded in delivering antiretroviral treatment to more than two million HIV-positive Africans by 2008 (up from just 50,000 before PEPFAR), saving many lives and contributing to economic development.[9]

Global Christian Networks, Trafficking and Slavery

Modern slavery—the sexual exploitation of trafficked women and children, forced labour, debt bondage, chattel birth and other forms of servitude—represents a clear threat to human dignity. The wide scope of modern slavery and trafficking—encompassing over 20 million people[10]—is due in part to the involvement of dangerous organised criminal syndicates that specialise in trafficking and labour exploitation. They employ intricate systems to move individuals within countries and across borders, and employ violence and intimidation to keep them in bondage.[11]

Because traffickers purposefully take advantage of weak governments and ineffective law enforcement, transnational Christian NGOs have provided some of the best documentation, rescue, rehabilitation and justice advocacy for trafficking victims.[12] A prominent example of this anti-trafficking movement is the work of the International Justice Mission, founded and led by Gary Haugen. Haugen's searing experience documenting atrocities in Rwanda motivated him to create a Christian organisation devoted to the international fight against injustice.[13] Haugen, an evangelical Christian, sees the fight for global justice as a central tenant of the Christian faith.[14] With a network of investigators and attorneys around the world, IJM directly frees victims, educates law enforcement officials, exposes corruption and presses for more effective national and international laws and policies. In successfully elevating the problem of trafficking and modelling successful law enforcement strategies to attack it, Haugen was recognised by US State Department as a Trafficking in Persons 'Hero'.

Another organisation that demonstrates the link between Christian theology and anti-trafficking efforts is the Catholic women's organisation Talitha Kum: The International Network of Consecrated Life Against Trafficking in Persons. Talitha Kum draws inspiration from the biblical stories of Ruth and the Samaritan woman to inspire solidarity with female victims of trafficking.[15] Sponsored by the International Union of Superiors General, Talitha Kum draws on this vast network of women in Catholic religious orders to respond to human rights abuses globally. It recently partnered with the US State Department in combating human trafficking at the 2014 World Cup.[16]

Transnational Christian networks have been crucial to establishing a new global regime to attack trafficking. Christian NGOs and lobby groups anchored the coalition behind the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and subsequent strengthening legislation.[17] The law created a major State Department office on trafficking with real enforcement teeth. This focus helped spark expanded attention by other governments, the United Nations, and international law enforcement agencies. By placing human dignity at the centre of their advocacy, religious actors helped catalyse non-religious actors and organisations to this global cause.

Christian Peacemaking Networks

Contemporary wars and violence disproportionately afflict the world's poor and call forth Christian peacemaking impulses, from mediation of active conflicts to facilitation of peaceful transitions to democracy to post-conflict reconciliation. In nearly every Christian peace effort, a strong emphasis on human dignity shines through as a prerequisite to negotiations, mediations or reconciliation. Inspired by biblical teachings, such as the 'The Sermon on the Mount', Christian actors and organisations have played an active and creative role in a number of situations.

The most successful involve the ability to cultivate trust-based linkages between all sides of a conflict. Christian groups also employ expansive human networks to promote peacemaking. From the hierarchal Catholic Church to the more decentralised pacifist denominations, diverse Christian use humanitarian and evangelistic connections to respond to conflicts across the globe.

Christian organizations are not the only religious groups to engage in peacemaking—Buddhist, Islamic and Jewish actors also press for mediation, call for policy changes and take active roles in post-conflict resolution. But an

Global Christian Networks for Human Dignity
Written by Allen D. Hertzke

examination of modern religious peacemaking efforts demonstrates the prevalence of Christian actors. The authors of *God's Century* provide the most comprehensive and systematic documentation of religious-based mediation over the past three decades.[18] Of the 21 disputes they identified in which religious actors played a role, 16 involved Christian groups exclusively. Moreover, of the conflicts where religious actors played a strong mediating role,*all involved Christian actors.* Thus Christianity plays a disproportionate role in faith-based conflict mediation. The global size and span of Christianity, its ethic of peacemaking and its robust international networks combined to produce this striking pattern.

Illustrative of this role is the Community of Sant'Egidio, an organisation of peacemakers nested in the larger Catholic world. In the *God's Century* study, this one group engaged in seven of the mediation cases, five of which involved strong mediation. The intensity and scope of the community's involvement in mediation efforts demonstrates the power of focused efforts connected to global Catholic networks. While their extraordinary efforts span activities from prayer to peace conferences, they seem to have an ability to bring disparate violent factions to the table in such diverse nations as Mozambique, Algeria, Uganda, Kosovo, Guatemala and Liberia.[19] In contrast to traditional methods of engagement, Sant'Egidio stress multi-polar, synergistic efforts that incorporate actors at all levels, from the grassroots to the international. This strategy offers responsiveness to local needs and guarantees of international organisations.

Pacifist Christian denominations, such as the Quakers and Mennonites, offer a distinct doctrinal and practical expression of the biblical call to be peacemakers. [20] Though small in size, they have cultivated transnational networks that capitalise on their ethic of non-violence. As credible third-party actors they have been prominent mediators in a number of civil wars and insurrections— delivering messages between combatants, offering neutral venues for negotiations and fostering environments for post-conflict conciliation.[21]

Conclusion

Each instantiation of Christian dignity is notable in its own right. But collectively we see the broad scope and weight of this witness in the world. Christian networks, while not always successful,[22] play an expansive and invaluable role on the global stage in human rights advocacy, humanitarian efforts and peacemaking. At a more theoretical level, what we observe is the emergence of a genuine global system, in which a theological ideal serves as a central organising principle. Unlike governmental structures or even UN institutions, this system is more organic and nimble in upholding human dignity. This system links local actors and congregations with international mission, development and denominational structures that magnify the collective Christian witness in policy circles. Perhaps we stand at a hinge point of Christian history as the faith's contribution to dignity and freedom becomes more fully manifest and global.

Notes

[1] This chapter is taken from a larger piece: Mark Brockway and Allen D. Hertzke, 'Christianity, Globalization, and Human Dignity', in *Christianity and Freedom: Contemporary Perspectives*, edited by Allen D. Hertzke and Timothy Samuel Shah, for the Religious Freedom Project, Georgetown University, under review.

[2] Kyle Harper, 'Christianity and the Roots of Human Dignity in Late Antiquity', in *Christianity and Freedom: Historical Perspectives,* edited by Timothy Samuel Shah and Allen D. Hertzke, 'Religious Freedom Project', Georgetown University, under review.

[3] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

[4] Robert Wuthnow, *Boundless Faith: The Global Outreach of American Churches* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

[5] As director of the Pew Research Center's 2011-2012 study, 'Lobbing for the Faithful', Allen Hertzke interviewed a

Global Christian Networks for Human Dignity

Written by Allen D. Hertzke

number of the advocacy directors of international relief and development organizations, and during field research in South Sudan in August of 2014 he interviewed country officials and indigenous staff of these organizations. The invocation to see the face of Christ in those they serve came out routinely and naturally in these conversations. See 'Lobbying for the Faithful', Pew Research Center: http://www.pewforum.org/2011/11/21/lobbying-for-the-faithful-exec/

[6] Andrew S. Nasios, 'Faith-Based NGOs and US Foreign Policy', in *The Influence of Faith: Religious Groups & US Foreign Policy*, edited by Elliot Abrams (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

[7] Stephen V. Monsma, 'Faith-based NGOs and the Government Embrace', in *The Influence of Faith: Religious Groups & US Foreign Policy,* ed. Elliott Abrams (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).

[8] Joshua William Busby, 'Bono Made Jesse Helms Cry: Jubilee 2000, Debt Relief, and Moral Action in International Politics', *International Studies Quarterly* 51 (2007), 247–275; 'Religious Leaders Cheer Debt Relief', *Christian Century*, November 2000.

[9] Scott Baldauf and Jina Moore, 'Bush Sees Results of His AIDS Plan in Africa', *The Christian Science Monitor*, February 20, 2008, 7.

[10] This is the figure given by the 2014 State Department's Trafficking in Person's report http://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2014/index.htm. Kevin Bales estimates 27 million persons in conditions of slavery. Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

[11] UNODC Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2014; Bales, *Disposable People.*

[12] Allen Hertzke, *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights (* Lanham, MD*:* Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), Chapter 8.

[13] Quentin Hardy, 'Hitting Slavery Where It Hurts (Gary Haugen of International Justice Mission)', *Forbes* 172, no. 14. 2004: 76.

[14] As Haugen writes, the 'good news' about injustice is that God is against it, which mandates that believers must fight against it as well. See Gary Haugen, *The Good News About Injustice* (Downers Grove, Il: InterVarsity Press, 1999).

[15] See Talith Kum's website for more information and mission statement. Accessed May 24, 2014. www.talithakum.info.

[16] US Embassy to the Holy See Conference on Building Bridges of Freedom, May 18, 2011, http://vatican.usembassy.gov/news-events/launch-talitha-kums-countering-trafficking-in-persons.html, accessed June 16, 2014; Elise Harris, "Anti-Human Trafficking Effort Launched ahead of World Cup," accessed June 21, 2014. http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/anti-human-trafficking-effort-launched-ahead-of-world-cup/.

[17] Hertzke, *Freeing God's Children*. For text of the act and subsequent reauthorizations see the state department office website http://www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/, accessed May 28, 2014.

[18] Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics,* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011) Chapter 7.

[19] *God's Century*, Chapter 7 and Table 7.1.

[20] For a historical and analytical look at Christian pacifist religions see Cecil John Cadoux. *Christian Pacifism Re-*

Global Christian Networks for Human Dignity

Written by Allen D. Hertzke

Examined (New York: Oxford University Press, 1940).

[21] Michael Norton Yarrow, *Quaker Experiences in International Conciliation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1978); Adam Curle, *True Justice: Quaker Peace Makers and Peace Making* (Philadelphia, PA: Quaker Books, 2007); Cynthia Sampson and John Paul Lederach, *From the Ground Up: Mennonite Contributions to International Peacebuilding* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[22] Christian solidarity networks championed the cause of the African peoples of southern Sudan, who for two decades were engulfed in a brutal civil war with the Islamist-dominated regime in Khartoum. The campaign led to the creation in 2011 of South Sudan, but that new nation was not equipped for self government and has been rent by factional violence and looming famine.

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Allen D. Hertzke is David Ross Boyd Professor of Political Science, University of Oklahoma and Faculty Fellow in Religious Freedom for OU's Institute for the American Constitutional Heritage. He is also Distinguished Senior Fellow for the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University and Senior Scholar for Georgetown University's project on Christianity and Freedom. He is author of *Representing God in Washington*, an award-winning analysis of religious lobbies, which has been issued in a Chinese-language translation, *Echoes of Discontent*, an account of church-rooted populist movements, *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights* , and co-author of *Religion and Politics in America*, a comprehensive text now in its fifth edition.