Judeo-Christian Thought, Classical Liberals, and Modern Egalitarianism

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Classical liberals bring much to the debate on modern egalitarianism, in particular their understanding of the overriding importance of moral agency and universal human dignity. Many classical liberals ground their understanding of human equality in natural-rights theory, whereas others reach similar conclusions about equality through consequentialist arguments, such as rule utilitarianism.[1] Whatever the basis for the concept of equal human dignity, it is important to understand that this understanding of the person is, in a historical context, a recent event.

For most of the recorded history of humankind, both mores and legal structures sanctioned differences in people. Not all humans were seen as moral agents capable of self-directedness. Slavery was almost universally sanctioned. Legal distinctions based on ethnicity, race, gender, and social class were justified as inevitable and appropriate. This essay traces out the evolution of belief from fundamental human inequality to universal equality.

The roots of human inequality lie deep in human history. Although a strong advocate of the virtuous life, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) believed that such virtue could

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1. Tibor Machan (1989, 1995), Robert Nozick (1974), and Douglas Rasmussen and Douglas Den Uyl (1997) are prominent natural-rights philosophers. In *Simple Rules for a Complex World* (1995), Richard Epstein uses rule utilitarianism to justify a set of rights that are remarkably similar to those espoused by the natural-rights advocates.

be achieved only by certain members of society, certainly not by slaves and women: "There are species in which a distinction is already marked, immediately at birth, between those of its members who are being ruled and those who are intended to rule. . . . Again, the relation of the male to the female is naturally that of the superior to the inferior—of the ruling to the ruled. It is thus clear that, just as some are by nature free, so others are by nature slaves" (1946, 1254a–55a).

Aristotle was not unique in his sanctioning of slavery. In early history, there were almost no defenders of human dignity outside of the Jewish world,[2] and in fact slavery was so common that articulating a reason for slavery was not even considered important. According to Thomas Sowell, "Aristotle had attempted to justify slavery, but many other Western and non-Western philosophers alike took it so much for granted that they felt no need to explain or justify it at all" (2005, 127). Other social differentiations based on ethnicity, gender, race, or social background likewise required no moral justification but were accepted as facts of life.

So if human equality and the rule of law have not been generally accepted until recently, what has caused this dramatic change in our basic anthropology? As in biological evolution, survival of the fittest has been a strong influence in cultural evolution. Nevertheless, belief structures can have a dramatic impact on the course of cultural evolution.[3] The economist Dani Rodrik argues, "Much human behavior is driven by abstract ideals, sacred values, or conceptions of loyalty that cannot be reduced to human ends" (2014, 191).

Two prominent thinkers, intellectual historian Larry Siedentop (2014) and French philosopher Luc Ferry (2011), argue that it took a metaphysical concept, seeing individuals as created in the image of God, to overcome the almost universal belief that people are fundamentally unequal. Despite its origins in early Jewish history and then in Christian anthropology, the concept of human equality took a long period of time to work its way into philosophical and political thinking before finally becoming fully ingrained in modern thought. Today almost everyone starts the discussion about egalitarianism with the assumption that all people should be free moral agents and that equality before the law is one of the most basic ways of expressing and defending that moral equality.

Luc Ferry argues that Christianity represented a dramatically different worldview than Greek philosophy because it contested the Greek aristocratic idea of differential human endowments and hence potentialities. "In direct contradiction [to Greek philosophy], Christianity was to introduce the notion that humanity was fundamentally identical, that men were equal in dignity—an unprecedented idea at that time and one to which our world owes its entire democratic inheritance. But this notion of equality did not come from nowhere" (2011, 72). "But with Christianity," Ferry explains,

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2. Judaism allowed some forms of slavery but put far more restrictions on its practice than other religious or social groups.

3. Joel Mokyr (2017) presents a summary of the varied influences on the process of cultural evolution.

the idea of a common humanity acquired a new strength. Based on the equal dignity of all human beings, it was to take on an ethical aspect. As soon as free will becomes the foundation of moral action and virtue is located not in natural, "unequal gifts," but in the use to which they are put, then it goes without saying that all men are of equal merit. Humanity would never again be able to divide itself (philosophically) according to a natural and aristocratic hierarchy of beings: between superior and inferior, gifted and less gifted, masters and slaves. From then on, according to Christians, we are all "brothers" on the same level as creatures of God and endowed with the same capacity to choose whether to act well or badly. Rich or poor, intelligent or simple: it no longer holds any importance. And this idea of equality leads to a primarily ethical conception of humanity. The Greek concept of barbarians—synonymous with a "stranger" (anyone not Greek)—soon disappeared to be replaced by the conviction that humanity is ONE. To conclude we could say that Christianity is the first *universalist* ethos; *universalism* meaning the doctrine or belief in universal salvation. (2011, 76–77, capitalization and italics in the original)

Although Ferry recognizes the historical influence of Christianity on philosophical thought, he is an atheist and hence does not spend much time discussing the actual theological doctrines that produced this radical departure from conventional thought. In reality, it was Judaism that provided the original foundation for dignity for all because of the concept of the *imago Dei,* a concept that is also crucial to Christian theology and anthropology. If all humans are bearers of the image of the omniscient, omnipotent God of the universe, then social and political equality are logical necessities of that concept.

If Jewish and Christian thought is responsible for the modern concept of human equality, why the long lag between the time this idea originated and the time it and institutions changed? Intellectual historian Larry Siedentop, like Ferry, sees the spread of Christian thinking as disruptive to the Greek and Roman idea that some are born to command and others to obey. Siedentop recognizes, however, that changes in fundamental concepts, such as the revolution in moral equality, require a long period of time to realize their full impact: "Centuries would be required for the implications of Christian moral beliefs to be drawn out and clarified—and even more time would pass before long established social practices or institutions were reshaped by these implications" (2014, 114).

The Jewish belief in human agency and moral equality manifested itself in many forms. That God chose to reveal his plan for humankind through a particular people, the Israelites, makes the universal claims of human dignity somewhat less obvious, but the creation account provides the metaphysical grounding for human dignity for all. The fundamental concept is in Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them" (English Standard Version).

According to Joshua Berman (2008), the Pentateuch, which is the first five books of Hebrew scripture, describes a social order that recognizes human dignity and that was much different from the order prevailing throughout the ancient Near East. Political and social hierarchy had strong metaphysical legitimation in the non-Israelite world, but the theology of the covenant in the Pentateuch rejects this hierarchy. In one of the most radical texts in ancient political economy, God asks for a commitment from all the Israelites, not just from their leaders. Even though Moses was the spokesperson for the people, the actual covenant was between God and all of the people, including the women and children (Deut. 29:10–15). Berman argues that "it is in the covenant, properly conceived, that we may discern a radically new understanding of the cosmic role of the common man within the thought systems of the ancient Near East, one that constituted the basis of an egalitarian social order" (2008, 29). The request of a commitment by all members of the society implies a strong sense of universal human agency, the ability of all to decide when asked to decide yea or nay to a moral proposition.

For Siedentop, "Christian moral intuitions played a pivotal role in shaping the discourse that gave rise to modern liberalism and secularism" (2014, 359). He sees the Apostle Paul (5–67) as the primary intellectual force in the development and spread of the concept of moral equality and moral agency of all people because Paul provided an ontological foundation for the concept of the individual. His Damascus Road encounter with Christ gave him clear instructions that the gospel message was relevant to all humanity because Christ's death and resurrection were atonement for all sinners everywhere. Through his travels throughout the Mediterranean world and his numerous letters to the various churches, Paul built upon the Jewish concept of universal dignity. The argument that the Christian faith was open to everyone also meant that all humans are moral agents, capable of choice and responsible for those choices. "Faith in Christ requires seeing oneself in others and others in oneself, the point of view which truly moralizes humans as agents" (Siedentop 2014, 65).

Among many New Testament texts that articulate the idea of human dignity for all, one of the most explicit is Paul's declaration, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Jesus himself made the claim that his atoning sacrifice was for all of humanity: "For God so loved the *world*, that he gave his only Son, that *whoever* believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, italics added).

Although Christians' moral practices often did not reflect the concept of universal human dignity, various spokespersons and numerous church documents would reiterate that theme again and again. Augustine, the great theologian who followed Paul, strongly articulated the concept of universal human dignity through his emphasis on the universal fallenness of humankind and the absolute necessity of God's grace for all (Madigan 2015, 107). Once again, this argument represented a sharp break from Greek and Roman thought, which denied human equality and drew sharp distinctions between classes, races, and sexes.

As Christianity spread throughout the Mediterranean world, new forms of human association arose. Monastic orders, quite prevalent by the fourth century, were a uniquely egalitarian social order, open to all believers no matter what their class or status. They also gave new meaning to the concept of work, changing it from an activity of servile status to an exercise of human dignity and worth (Siedentop 2014, 95, 160).

Women also formed cloisters, sometimes as separate communities and sometimes as "double monasteries," where female and male monks lived in the same monastic premises (Madigan 2015, 22, 43). Women's choices to join such orders meant recognition of their own moral agency, something not possessed by most women throughout ancient history. For instance, Aristotle saw women as incomplete or deformed men and hence not truly human in the sense of having the ability to make moral choices (Madigan 2015, 275).

The Roman Catholic Church's concern for the poor and disenfranchised was an important step in the recognition of universal human dignity. Hospitals for the care of the needy were an important part of monastic life. The laity were taught that charity was one of the highest of virtues: "certain ways of life, and entire social classes of people, could no longer simply be dismissed as incorrigible or irredeemable" (Madigan 2015, 311). Hildebrand of Sovana (1028–85), who became Pope Gregory VII, declared that rulers would be judged according to what they had done for "all souls" (Siedentop 2014, 206). Knights were also expected to respect property rights, especially those of the powerless (Siedentop 2014, 186). According to Kevin Madigan, a "prodigious volume of spiritual and secular charity [was] received by the poor and anguished in the high and late Middle Ages" (2015, 314).

The fact that the Christian worldview was responsible for the concept of equal human dignity does not mean that the believers always acted in a manner consistent with an egalitarian belief structure. There was a continual tension between the revolutionary doctrine of the *imago Dei* and actual social practices. For instance, it was a remarkable statement of human agency that slaves were accepted into the community of faith from the beginning of Christianity, but Christians nevertheless still held slaves for more than a millennium. Gregory (335–95), bishop of Nyssa, made a strong plea for the immorality of slavery, but it took another fourteen hundred years for his arguments to gain substantial traction in the Christian world.

Jeffrey Grynaviski and Michael Munger (forthcoming) give a detailed account of how Christians in the nineteenth-century American South were able to provide a rationalization for slaveholding. That ideology was eventually defeated militarily by the Union armies and intellectually by the tenets of modern liberalism. The abolitionist argument that a Christian could not in good conscience favor slavery was also an important influence. Today it is impossible to find Christian arguments for slaveholding.

In the sixteenth century, Spain's colonization of South America clearly violated the rights of the indigenous people (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012, 9–19). During the religious wars of Europe from 1524 to 1648, Protestants and Catholics had little compunction about killing each other.

Despite the fact that the social order did not fully reflect the idea of human dignity, numerous voices articulated the concept and were responsible for its eventually becoming a part of standard political thought. In 316, Constantine (306–337) banned the branding of criminals on the face, for "man is made in God's image" (qtd. in Siedentop 2014, 117). Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) was one of the most influential women of her age. She was an articulate defender of orthodox Christian belief but protested vehemently against the burning of heretics because the heretic was also made in the image of God.

The authority of law and especially the concept of natural law, a law distinct from the state's legal apparatus, were strengthened by the ongoing development of canon law. Moral equality before the law was a basic presupposition of canon law, and its elaboration from 1050 to 1300 made it the first modern legal system (Siedentop 2014, 226). According to Brian Tierney, "By 1200 the canonists had created a language in which natural rights theories could readily be expressed" (1997, 69).

Scholasticism, a system of thought that used reason to articulate and formalize principles of human ordering, also advanced the concept of human dignity, largely through the development of the natural law (Forster 2008). There were differences among the Scholastics, especially ones such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) and William of Ockham (1287–1347), regarding the exact content of God's law, but they all affirmed humans as agents of free will with the ability to discover truth.

The church's natural-law and natural-rights doctrines were an important part of political thought long before the modern era, but they were more forcefully articulated and more successfully applied to cultural structures with the coming of the Protestant Reformation. One of Martin Luther's primary claims was the dignity of all humans as expressed in his tract "The Freedom of the Christian" (1520) (Witte 2006, 5051). Because we all stand equal before God, human equality is divinely constructed, not humanly constructed. Luther (1483–1546) did not develop a strong case for political freedom; in fact, after the Peasant's Revolt of 1525, he emphasized strong political authority as necessary for an orderly society. Nevertheless, his argument for freedom of conscience was an important first step in the development of more general human rights.

John Calvin (1509–64) wrote eloquently about the importance of protecting other domains in life—including church, family, and commerce—from potentially selfish use of power in the hands of political rulers. This was another important step toward recognizing that people have political and economic rights. Theodore Beza (1519–1605), a reformer in the mold of Calvin, developed a more complete articulation of an appropriate political order that protected religious and economic liberty. Although Beza's writings represented new developments in political and religious thought, he drew upon centuries of Christian thinking. In the words of John Witte, Beza "called on five decades of Protestant and five centuries of Catholic teachings on law, politics, and society as well as the whole arsenal of classical and patristic sources" (2007, 89).

Although much of the early debate over religious liberty and individual rights occurred in France and Germany, the Netherlands fairly quickly became a hotbed for

discussion about the importance of the image of God in formulating rules for the political order. Johannes Althusius (1557–1638) was probably the most important contributor to this debate. Althusius was an active pamphleteer, authoring numerous pieces on natural law and the liberties of individuals and groups.

Althusius started his theory of society and politics with an account of the state of nature—which he equated with human nature and more particularly with the nature of persons as creatures and bearers of the image of God. God created humans as moral creatures, Althusius argued, with natural law written on their hearts and consciences as well as "an innate inclination," "hidden impulse," and "natural instinct" to be "just and law abiding." God created persons as rights holders, vested with natural sovereignty, rooted in the supernatural sovereignty of God, whose image each person bears upon birth (Witte 2007, 182).

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, religious toleration, a radical concept in Christian history, became a part of Dutch political life. "But the Dutch had also come to believe that religious toleration was the most Christian policy as well as the most politically effective policy" (Forster 2008, 153). Such toleration was based on the concept of the equal human dignity of all, despite differences in religious belief.

This period also witnessed a vibrant intellectual debate over the rights and duties of English citizens. Between 1640 and 1680, more than twenty-two thousand pamphlets, sermons, and tracts were published. The power of the sovereign, the protection of the rights of citizens, and the legitimacy of various laws and forms of governance were hotly contested (Witte 2007, 213). As in the Netherlands, in England a major part of the political debate over human rights was driven by the articulation of the dignity of all people in the biblical doctrines of Christ's death for all humans and the universality of the image of God in every person. These doctrines were important influences on the move to the rule of law, contract enforcement for all market participants, and the opening of occupations and businesses to a wider range of people.

Although numerous theologians and philosophers were involved in the debate, one of the most important figures was John Milton (1608–74). According to Witte, "[I]t was the great poet and political philosopher John Milton who provided the most interesting integrative theory of rights and liberty. . . . Milton argued that each person is created in the image of God with 'a perennial craving' to love God, neighbor, and self. Each person has the law of God written on his or her heart, mind, and conscience and rewritten in Scripture, most notably in the Decalogue" (2007, 12).

Deirdre McCloskey (2016) provides copious details on the many ways in which the concept of universal dignity became a part of ordinary life.[4] Literature, language,

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4. Although providing substantial evidence of the concept of human equality in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and the Netherlands, McCloskey sees such equality as springing up almost without any historical roots before that period. That view is in sharp contrast to the arguments given in this essay.

Bible translations, church governance, and attitudes toward wealth generation were affected by this ideological revolution.

The gradual development of the concept of full-blown human agency and human equality created a natural tension with many of the claims of religious authority. If individuals are moral agents with the ability to choose from a large range of belief structures, what is the role of the church, which claims to articulate a unique belief structure as the path to salvation? Numerous Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers struggled with this conflict, and the concept of equal human dignity gradually served to delegitimize the religious claims of absolute authority. Thus, the doctrine of equality, with its strong roots in Christian thought, came to be used against the church's claims to use political power to enforce its definition of heresy.

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was one of the first to articulate in *Leviathan* ([1651] 1962) an antireligious perspective on human ordering that was based on human equality. According to Peter Berkowitz, "While Hobbes is not a liberal in the classic sense of the term, he should be seen as a major figure in the laying of the foundations of the liberal state. . . . Hobbes argued that human beings are fundamentally equal and endowed with certain natural and inalienable rights" (1999, 36).

John Locke (1632–1704) published *Two Treatises of Government* around 1689, the same year that the English Bill of Rights was adopted. He offered what would later come to be the predominant understanding of the rights proclaimed in that document, developing more fully the conditions under which a revolution was justified. He also developed a much more complete theory of natural rights than was embodied in the Bill of Rights of 1689. Locke (1960) argued for the application of natural law equally to all because all are equally God's creatures made to exercise dominion over the natural order.

Locke also made a substantial contribution to the concept that the rule of law applied equally to all because of his principle of religious freedom (Forster 2008, 161–65). Prior to Locke, political philosophy justified the use of the state's coercive power against heretics, with the reigning religious authorities responsible for defining heresy. This assignment of responsibility meant that there were always members of society who could not claim equal treatment under the law because of their particular set of religious (or nonreligious) beliefs. Locke said government should enforce the rules of justice and equity. As Greg Forster puts it, "If government plays favorites among religions in any way, it undermines the moral laws on which government itself is based, because those laws require the impartial administration of justice to all people" (2008, 162).

Montesquieu (1689–1755) also was an articulate defender of human equality, using a concept similar to the Rawlsian "veil of ignorance" to argue that rational human beings would not choose a system of slavery if they did not know which side of the ownership–owned divide they would fall ([1748] 1989, 253).

Hobbes, Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78), and Montesquieu were important shapers of the philosophical groundings of the new liberal order. There were sharp differences among them as to where and how human equality existed and what

constituted a just and workable social and political system, but they all integrated the concept of universal human dignity into their philosophies. These thinkers found a way of preserving the basic assumption of the Western religious beliefs about human dignity while avoiding the assumptions that led to the devastating consequences of the wars of religion over what constituted heresy. Siedentop argues that these Enlightenment thinkers succeeded in grounding modern liberalism "on the moral assumptions provided by Christianity. It preserves Christian ontology without the metaphysics of salvation" (2014, 338).

Conclusion

The move from a widely accepted concept of human inequality to a belief in universal equality was a long process of cultural evolution. Judaism and Christianity provided a metaphysical concept, all humans are bearers of God's image, that shaped that evolutionary path. Enlightenment thinkers advanced the argument for equal human dignity by articulating the principles of a social and political order based on human agency, but with stringent limits on the power structures' ability to define and enforce a particular concept of heresy. Thus, classical liberals, with their well-developed arguments about human equality as the appropriate basis for the modern polity, are heirs to a long process of intellectual and cultural evolution, a process that has been influenced by both religious and secular thinkers.

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