

Human Dignity and its Discontents

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Those were heady days in 1947 and 1948 when the United Nations' Human Rights Commission was meeting to hammer out, and then to shepherd laboriously through committee, what eventually became the Preamble and 30 Articles of arguably the 20th century's single most important international declaration: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It all happened during a rare rent or crack in history's turbulent fabric—the brief and relative calm between the end of history's bloodiest and most devastating war and the heating up of the Cold War that ushered in a new international polarization. Thus it seemed that an international consensus on a set of universal values enshrined as rights could only be achieved, and its proclamation gotten away with, as it were, during that brief respite from the habitual din of human strife. And yet, this is not to be taken as a blemish on the Declaration's claim to universality. As Mary Ann Glendon convincingly illustrates in her 2001 monumental study of the genesis of the Declaration, the UDHR's subsequent endorsement by so many different nations who were not present at the actual voting in December 1948 effectively eliminates the charge that it was a Western document whose universality is in doubt. And in the face of the challenge of cultural relativism, Glendon writes this: "The Declaration's architects expected that its fertile principles could be brought to life in a legitimate variety of ways. Their idea was that each local tradition would be enriched as it put the Declaration's principles into practice and that all countries would benefit from the resulting accumulation of experiences." "This is evident," she continues, "from the leeways they afforded in text for different modes of imagining, weighting, and implementing various rights (except the tightly drawn rights not to be tortured, enslaved, or otherwise subjected to aggression)."

The framers of the Declaration were therefore sensitive to local variations, but this did not cause them to abandon a firm adherence to an overarching concept of rights that applied equally to all manifestations of the human experience. Glendon continues: "Chang, Cassin, Malik, and Roosevelt were not homogenizers, but they were universalists in the sense that they believed that human nature was everywhere the same and that the processes of experiencing, understanding, and judging were capable of leading everyone to certain basic truths." In history, and for a plethora of complex reasons, universal truths are first glimpsed and articulated within specific cultural contexts and not others, but their particular place of formulation does not in any way diminish their timeless relevance for all humanity. The

West has often been the cradle of universal insights, yet this fact of origin never meant these insights were only Western.

I was present in 1993 in Vienna at the World Conference on Human Rights representing an NGO based in Lebanon. I recall the powerful affirmation of the universality of human rights at that gathering in the face of a small group of dictatorships led by China. I also recall the many representatives of indigenous peoples assembled outside the conference venue in all their colorful ethnic costumes clamoring for recognition, but receiving none. It was a truly multicultural spectacle, a celebration of diversity attempting to squeeze in beneath the all-encompassing umbrella of universal human rights. The difference between those noble native protestors in Vienna and, for example, the anti-globalization crowds one sees at gatherings of world leaders like the G-8 summits and the World Economic Forum at Davos is that the native ethnic groups are pleading for inclusion in the name of preserving their human dignity and self-respect. Moreover, they're doing so in a calm and civilized manner—a lofty endeavor indeed. The anti-globalization mobs, on the other hand, while sincere in most cases, have an unrealistic aim and remain essentially romantics, anarchists, or nihilists with little to offer by way of positive workable alternatives, and with no hesitation to resort to violence.

The world human rights movement, as part of its justified assertion of the universality of these rights, must at all times give priority to upholding human dignity in whatever cultural setting such dignity seems to be threatened. Multiculturalism and the blanket respect for cultural diversity must not overshadow the need for constant vigilance against those elements in particular that undermine human dignity. Examples include the denigration of women and minorities, disregard for the weak and unborn, and institutionalized second-class status for specific groups within society. At the same time multiculturalism does not mean the absence of a hierarchy of values, or the blurring of right and wrong on the level of conscience. Sophocles' *Antigone* more than 2300 years ago made that crystal clear for all time. The overabundance of cultural experiences, outlooks, and ways of life; the kaleidoscope of traditions, lifestyles, ethno-religious realities, and socio-cultural achievements—in other words, the entire set of human variations that we designate under multiculturalism is very enriching and stimulating; it is a wonderful and exciting thing, especially for young people. But multiculturalism was never intended to signify a cultural and moral relativism and the elimination of universality. It does not mean the loss of specific personal and group pride and worth, or a sense of self-awareness—all dissolved indiscriminately in some multicultural cauldron. It does not imply that anything goes including tolerating those who would violate the sanctity of respect for the different other. It does not prescribe turning against, or downplaying, one's own deeply held and time-honored convictions merely for the sake of not offending others with different or contradictory views and beliefs. It does not advise denying history and specific narratives of identity as a way of paying homage to the god of sheer flat variety. Lastly, multiculturalism is not a permit for leveling and homogenizing everything and equating everything—a distortion that inevitably leads to the fallacy of moral equivalence.

In a way and from his earliest formation, Charles Malik had acquired a sharp sense for the universal, the lasting, the ultimate, and the decisive in life. By the time he arrived at the San

Francisco conference in 1945 that established the United Nations, Malik had studied basic science and taught math and physics, and he had read extensively in philosophy and worked for a doctorate in that discipline under both Whitehead at Harvard and Heidegger in Freiburg. Moreover, Malik was a man of profound religious faith. An early expression of Malik's universalist orientation came in 1946 at the UN when he delivered a speech on the importance of promoting the study of the world classics as timeless depictions of the human condition applicable to any cultural context. Next came his work within the Human Rights Commission on the creation of the UDHR, and from the start his interventions and contributions were universalist in nature. Here is one example from the Commission's deliberations in January 1947: "I wish further to say that the very phrase 'human rights' obviously refers to man and by 'rights' you can only mean that which belongs to the essence of man. This means that which is not accidental, that which does not come and go with the passage of time and with the rise and fall of fads and styles and systems. It must be something belonging to man as such. We are therefore raising the fundamental question, what is man? And our differences will reflect faithfully the differences in our conceptions of man, namely of ourselves." So, there are acknowledged differences in outlook, but there is also room for common agreement on human rights across cultures, as the philosophers of UNESCO's blue-ribbon panel, who in 1947 solicited the opinions of statesmen and scholars from diverse cultural backgrounds the world over, eventually confirmed. Malik persistently argued against a narrow focus and a parochial tilt: "I believe there is a danger of being provincial, in time as well as in place. This, to me, is fundamental. We must gather our wisdom and light from all time [recall his emphasis on the classics]. The intellectual climate of the present day, in my opinion, only raises the question of fundamental freedom and human rights, but it does not answer it."

In the spirit of appealing to wider and more enduring wisdom, Malik formulated his four principles in defense of the individual human person, which had a profound effect on the work of the Commission and found their way, through a variety of expressions, to the final version of the UDHR.

1. The human person is inherently prior to any group to which he or she may belong—class, race, country, nation, gender, creed, etc.
2. People's minds and consciences are the most sacred and inviolable things about them,... which enable them to see the truth and to reject or accept it freely, therefore, to choose and to be.
3. Any social pressure coming from any direction whatsoever, that automatically determines a person's consent, is wrong.

And

4. The group to which a person belongs... can be wrong, just as an individual person can be wrong. In either case, it is only the individual person in his mind and conscience who is the competent judge of the rights and wrongs involved.

Take these four principles and couple them with Malik's emphasis on the freedom to change one's beliefs, as Article 18 of the UDHR states, and add to this mix Malik's defense of what he termed the "intermediate institutions" in society that cushion the individual person from the overbearing pressures of the state (i.e. what we today refer to collectively as civil society—family, church, intimate circle of friends, independent pursuit of science and truth

at the university and research center, free media, syndicates, associations, trade unions, etc. that are utterly independent of any government and any state)—take all these and you have a magnificent bulwark that defends the sanctity of human individuality through upholding the dignity and freedom of every single human person in the face of “the two deadly perils against man and his freedom in modern times,” as Malik designated them in 1949: the pressure of material things and the pressure of society/the state. It is through these intermediate institutions that the full meaning of citizenship including the fulfillment of personal potential is exercised and finds scope for creative expression.

Charles Malik was one of the earliest outspoken voices at the United Nations against the totalitarian state, and in the 1950s, in speech after fiery speech, he often single-handedly took on, and thoroughly refuted, the ideological tenets and underpinnings of communism in the face of Soviet representatives like Vishinsky and others. Malik recognized the errors and dangers of communism and persistently exposed the inhuman side of its materialistic creed predicting all the while that this system cannot last and is bound to collapse. He died at the tail end of 1987 just shy of witnessing his lifelong confident prediction come true. In his speeches and articles he would ask repeatedly: “Which is for the sake of the other? Is the state for the sake of the human person, or is the human person for the sake of the state?”

Challenges in today’s world abound that directly target the inner sanctity and integrity of our personhood and that constitute assaults on human dignity. Materialism has been mentioned, and although the ideological materialism of communism may have receded, the crass consumer variety of capitalism is still very much alive. The adoration of man-made things (which is what all materialism ultimately is) remains with us as a potent force in the ongoing war on the spirit. Charles Malik identified this materialism and warned against it: “Materialism then is much deeper than Marxism. It is man’s natural tendency to flee his personal responsibility and to seek his rest in the guarantee of external things, whether they are 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.” It is the age-old human tendency towards idolatry—worship of the creature—and from the start it began to upset the priorities of the original framers of the UDHR. Malik again writing in 1951: “Certain rights are assuming exaggerated importance: it is hard to keep them in their place. Who is not clamoring today for his economic rights, for what is called a decent standard of living? Who does not insist on impressing upon the so-called underdeveloped areas that only if they introduce modern techniques and develop their natural resources will all be well with them? Indeed there are abuses and injustices and stupidities in modern society that cannot be condoned or overlooked, and up to a certain point the past thoughtless neglect of the material side of existence must be corrected. But there is a deadly danger that in our enthusiasm for economic and social justice we forget that man cannot live by bread alone. The exaggeration of the material and animal side of human life at the expense of the intellectual and spiritual side is one of the great ills of the present day... Surely a Socrates dissatisfied is infinitely better than a pig satisfied.”

We have seen how relativism and its derivative subjectivism continue to undermine the universal and the unchanging. In the final analysis the cultural and egotistical relativism

rampant everywhere today serves repressive governments and systems because it eliminates all independent and objective standards of accountability. It is the ultimate wolf in sheep's skin: in the name of safeguarding and promoting multicultural variations relativism strips the human being of any recourse to a higher set of judging criteria that alone are capable of offering salvation from human failings, both individual and collective. By leveling all legitimate hierarchies, or substituting erroneous and dangerous gradations in their place, relativism contributes significantly to the current moral confusion in modern times leaving humans adrift in an ocean of purposelessness. Relativism is part of the war on the spirit and with someone like Jean-Paul Sartre, for instance, it takes the extreme form of the outright denial of a shared human nature, meaning no a priori human blueprint that binds us all together and defines who we are ontologically. One wishes to ask Sartre and his ilk how they would account for universal human manifestations such as envy and the shame that causes blushing: is it all merely a matter of chemical reactions causing a sudden onrush of blood to the face and the cheeks?

This of course brings us to another scourge of the present age that aims to explain away everything human in purely chemical or physical, i.e. in mechanistic terms. This is scientism, more precisely its subset biologism. What is left of human dignity when human existence is reduced to a matter of interacting electric impulses and chemical reactions? Moreover, science and technology offer amazing prospects for creating whole new species of plants and animals including maybe a new race of humans, thanks to the incredible advances in gene manipulation. But the burning question that lingers is: What system of values guides the manipulator? Much humility is needed on the part of cutting-edge scientists as they wield ever greater powers of control over nature. Why? Because nothing less than human dignity is at stake once they lose sight of a higher moral purpose to their endeavors. The illusion of human self-sufficiency instilled by scientism leading to the arrogance of self-glorification is detrimental to the welfare of humanity as such.

Perhaps the greatest threat to human dignity still active in today's world is the unrelenting attack on religious liberty that one comes across in certain societies and systems. Leading violators in this regard include Iran, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, China, North Korea, and Cuba—in other words, the remnants of communism and extremist Islamist regimes. Anticipating this and recognizing the paramount centrality of religious freedom, Pope Paul VI, at the end of the Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council on December 7, 1965, promulgated the declaration on religious liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*. The document reaffirms the Church's teaching that religious freedom is a right innately belonging to every person simply because of his or her humanness. In religious terms, human dignity derives from the Imago Dei, namely the fact that human beings are created in the image of their creator and that they possess eternal souls and are called upon, freely and in love, to be the full children of God. Depriving people of their religious freedom is tantamount to a vicious form of dehumanization that totalitarian and fanatical states practice in order to subjugate further their enslaved populations.

Several wars are being simultaneously waged against human dignity: The war on guilt in the form of unbridled permissiveness and the instilling of a culture of greed; the war on conscience through a sustained deadening of any internal faculty that provides intuitive

recognition of right and wrong; the war on wonder involving the deliberate cultivation, particularly in the youth, of an attitude of indifference to everything; and most sinisterly, the war on hope. On this question of indifference the French philosopher and mathematician Pascal wrote that “the doubter who does not seek is at the same time very unhappy and very wrong.” Pascal was merely providing a gloss on the Biblical dictum that to be lukewarm is worse than being outright cold. To care for the ultimate questions and one’s place in existence and to wonder enough to commence a quest for answers—these are what define the human species. Indifference therefore is a throwback to sub-human or animal-like being. On the question of hope perhaps one of the towering inspirations of our times has been Pope John Paul II in everything he did and wrote. His encyclical of March 25, 1995 entitled *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life) is a powerful statement of hope for humanity: “Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the *greatness* and the *inestimable value* of human life even in its temporal phase.” John Paul continues: “[L]ife on earth...remains a *sacred reality* entrusted to us, to be preserved with a sense of responsibility and brought to perfection in love....Even in the midst of difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart the sacred value of human life from its very beginning until its end, and can affirm the right of every human being to have this primary good respected to the highest degree.” Ponder these words carefully and you have the full rebuttal to every violation of human dignity underway in the world around us.

The difference between a statesman and a politician is precisely in the realm of values and vision. A statesman is a leader with a morally grounded vision, while a politician is at best a dealmaker with a personal agenda. That’s why there are so few statesmen and so many politicians. This is not to denigrate politicians; the world needs them and there’s certainly room for what they do. But the world always thirsts for statesmen with personal integrity, an unembarrassed sense of right and wrong, and a set of attainable objectives for the good of all. When a person of character and charisma emerges in an otherwise leveling and relativistic age the world takes notice and responds. In its heart of hearts the human spirit rebels against this leveling and this relativism; hence, the incredible resonance everywhere of the life-affirming message of Pope John Paul II. What a spokesman for the abiding dignity of the human person!