

# Do we need 'religious approaches' to Human Rights?

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*Keith Porteous Wood offers a critical review of a new book that claims Human Rights owe their existence to religion – when the greatest modern threat to Human Rights comes from organised religion.*

A book on 'Religious approaches to Human Rights' has just been published, written by the former theological adviser to the Church of England's Bench of Bishops. Why bishops should need such an adviser is itself a curiosity - aren't they supposed to be "advising" the rest of us?

Anyway, attending the book's launch at the Houses of Parliament it struck me that everyone else there seemed keen on the book's underlying assumption that "religion is needed to provide a robust philosophical foundation for human rights, and is a vital component of the human flourishing that human rights aim to achieve". At least my presence there served to relieve the tedium of everyone agreeing with each other.

Ideally, of course, the religious and the non-religious alike should coalesce to promote Human Rights, but this book unconvincingly contends that religion is a precondition for human rights. Not only is this incorrect and self-serving but it is the opposite of the truth.

The book is a concerted effort to escalate the decades-long campaign to make Human Rights subject to religion, which I am convinced would fatally weaken if not destroy them. I have voiced this fear before at a plenary session of a Council of Europe conference: organised religion is among the greatest threats to Human Rights, and there is ample evidence of this. Earlier this month, the Saudi ambassador to the UN is reported to have told a UN Human Rights Council that Saudi Arabia "[would not accept any recommendations that contravene Islamic law](#)". This is a new low after years of decline in Human Rights at the hand of religion recently [catalogued by Roy Brown](#), for many years chef de mission at the UN of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. In the [New York Times](#) a liberal Muslim has just bemoaned the deteriorating climate for freedom of expression in Muslim countries that he believes is holding them back, contrasting this with Islam's 'Golden Age', a time of much greater freedom of expression and openness.

So successful has this religious campaign been that, sadly, as I observed, we can no longer realistically call the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) "Universal", largely because of them being undermined by religion. I pointed to the [Cairo Declaration](#), the Muslim world's alternative to the Universal Declaration agreed in 1990. The Cairo declaration includes the phrase "subject to sharia" over a dozen times - in effect saying "forget the Universal Declaration, sharia principles are all that matter".

I also pointed to the general paucity of Human Rights compliance in so many highly religious – especially Muslim majority – countries, particularly on freedom of religion, belief, conscience and expression. This did not faze my opponents; they didn't even try to disagree, and indeed they largely agreed. To their credit, the chapter on "Islam and Human Rights" starts "The Elephant in the Room", and there are critiques of other religions' attitudes to Human Rights. They seemed,

however, unable or unwilling to see how this undermines their arguments.

And just for good measure, I learned that secularism is portrayed by the supporters of "religious human rights" as the epitome of evil and the antithesis of Human Rights. "Natural rights" (whatever they are, I suspect natural in the eyes of the beholder) ... "were undermined by secularism and Western liberalism since they were related to no transcendent reality, and therefore became a matter of power struggles between interest groups with no means of arbitration between them".

Presumably those holding such views expect those who claim to know God's will on Human Rights to transmit them to ordinary mortals. Quite how it is decided or arbitrated when different divine perspectives are offered wasn't made clear.

The book peddles the fallacy that the secular state's "denial of God and/or an objective transcendent [not words that coexist easily?] moral law ... fails ... [the law that] is needed for human flourishing." This state could hardly be further from the kind of state envisaged in the National Secular Society's [Secular Charter](#); an infinitely preferable and fairer state than the many theocracies with appalling human rights records.

We are in a "post-secular age" the author claims, and if "the idea of human rights is to survive ... it must take the contributions of religions seriously". I agree that human rights are in deep trouble, a major threat being increasingly aggressive religion. An example given is that "any Bill of Rights must be drafted in religiously intelligible terms". No, it is not that some religious people cannot understand plain language, it is code for subservience being required to religion, indeed as was said forcefully at the launch (I paraphrase) religion is powerful again, submit to it.

Of course religion has undeniably hugely increased in our consciousness over the last two decades, but largely because of violence and outrages. And I doubt if the religions which will impose themselves most strongly will be the gentlest, most enlightened ones, a reflection some of the other religions might reflect upon before promoting religion as the only - or at least preferred - solution to human rights.

Seemingly, "Secularism can itself be described as a religious approach". Is this letting secularism off the hook? No. We are being set up for "a secular approach [that] has no more *a priori* claim to validity than a religious approach". It seems the validity only comes from heaven above.

The meeting was chaired by the evangelical MP Fiona Bruce and the main presentation by the author, Dr Martin Davie. Leading Anglican Baroness Butler Sloss was in the audience as was Stephen Timms, MP - chair of the Christian Socialist Movement, now renamed Christians on the Left, Joel Edwards former head of the Evangelical Alliance and Chris Sugden trustee of the Anglican Mainstream which is a voice for "orthodox Christian views", "especially on the sexuality question".

The book is a useful, if unedifying and self-serving, compendium of religious power-seeking over Human Rights. So keen was the author to leave no stone unturned in denigrating the non-religious, however, he states that the *number* of people (worldwide) who are religiously unaffiliated is likely to fall ... over the next few decades." Yet, the reference he gives to the Pew Research Centre findings specifically states the opposite: "The unaffiliated population will rise by nearly ten per cent in the decades ahead [between 2010-2050]".

While the number rises, I accept the proportion of the unaffiliated to the total population drops, because of the much higher growth of the religiously affiliated over this period. This is due to their

greater fecundity which has other implications beyond the scope of this blog.

At the talk the author presented the Church of England as an umbrella group protecting those of all denominations and religions, presumably from an increasingly secular society. It took an intervention from me to remind him that the Church's treatment over the centuries of other denominations, of other religions and of people who didn't believe had been the very opposite of his benign portrayal. He graciously amended his claim to relate to the period since the end of the 19th century.

Human Rights have the potential to transcend religious differences – so let's not let them be diminished by them. The work of the [International Humanist and Ethical Union](#), to which the National Secular Society is affiliated, just goes to show how vital a secular approach to Human Rights is – to fend off religious challenges at the UN that would fatally and fundamentally undermine them.

### **Keith Porteous Wood**

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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