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**Human Rights and
the Human Quest**

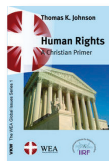


Pro mundis
Pro mundis

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Human Rights and the Human Quest

Thomas K. Johnson

Without God?

“It comes to this,’ Tarrou said almost casually: ‘What interests me is learning how to become a saint.’

‘But you don’t believe in God.’

‘Exactly! Can one be a saint without God? – that’s the problem, in fact the only problem I’m up against today.’”

Albert Camus wrote these memorable lines in his novel *The Plague*, published in 1947, after observing the first half of a century marked by unbelievable brutality: two world wars which cost the lives of so many millions, war crimes of previously unknown magnitude in both Europe and Asia, the Holocaust, joined with some knowledge of Stalin’s purge of the Soviet Union at the cost of millions of lives. Camus’s reactions contributed to the worldwide reactions that led to the international concern for human rights. When Camus wrote these penetrating lines, at least three important matters were pressing on his mind. First, he was deeply sensitive to human suffering, described so profoundly in all his fiction, which may either be caused by human brutality or allowed to continue because of a lack of human moral sensitivity. The unprecedented cruelty toward people demonstrated by Hitler and Stalin convinced Camus that life is

meaningless and forced him to wonder if suicide were the only sensible response to such cruelty and the absurdity of life.² Second, he was wrestling with Dostoevsky’s Dilemma, articulated by Fyodor Dostoevsky’s character Dmitry Karamozov in *The Brothers Karamozov*, “If there is no God, then everything is permitted.” Camus was an atheist for most of his life, whereas Dostoevsky believed in God. And Camus realized that if God does not exist, then it is very difficult to avoid becoming a nihilist, feeling like and believing that there is no truth, no meaning for life, and no distinction between right and wrong. Indeed, Camus confessed about his writings, “I have only sought for a means to overcome nihilism.”³ Third, Camus honestly faced some important facts of normal moral experience that seemed to contradict his atheism and the nihilism that easily follows from atheism: deep inside ourselves we feel sympathy for the needs and suffering of other people, joined with a feeling of duty, that we have a moral obligation to other people or for other people, all of which is somehow based on an intuition that humans have a unique dignity and destiny. But if human life is nothing but a cosmic accident, not in any way caused or created by God, why should human suffering bother

me any more than the suffering of an insect? And why do I have this strong sense of moral obligation in relation to other people? For these reasons, the hero of Camus's novel decides to try to become a saint without God, struggling to reduce or overcome human suffering. However, this point of view contains so much internal tension that Camus himself could not continue trying to be a saint without God. His awareness of human need, suffering, and our common human moral obligation pushed him to break out of the dilemma and conclude that there must be a God who created human beings with a special dignity and destiny and who somehow stands behind moral obligation. Shortly before his death in a tragic auto accident, Albert Camus requested Christian baptism.⁴

This big dilemma, so nicely articulated by Dostoevsky and Camus, stands at the heart of the modern human rights movement. Does the extent of evil and suffering tell us to become atheist nihilists and say that there is no God, no meaning, and no distinction between right and wrong? Or is the attempt to try to become a saint without God the right response? Or does the humane response of so many indicate that God exists and that we know him unconsciously as the precondition of our lives? There is a strong internal connection between a practical concern for human rights, really for protecting people, and the quest into which we have all been thrown by the fact of birth. We cannot avoid the big questions: Who are we?

What gives human life value? What is this world? Where did it come from? What is wrong with the world? What is wrong with us? Why do we have a sense of moral obligation? Why can we not avoid crying out for justice? Why can we not avoid crying out for mercy? So, I have to ask, what does the existence of the human rights movement tell us about the nature of the universe and ultimate Truth?

A Wide Concern and Big Questions

It would be a serious mistake to think that the quest for human dignity and the concern for human rights are only matters for philosophical novelists like Camus or Dostoevsky. A quick Google search of the internet identifies 77,400,000 items one might read on the subject of human rights.⁵ There are millions of other documents on the topic of human dignity. The annual US State Department world report on human rights has grown to over 5,000 pages published each year; the European Union annual world human rights report is limited to a readable size, about 100 pages, but it is published in 20 languages. The US, the EU, and the UN have budgeted very significant funds for their human rights/human dignity programs; a review of founding documents shows that the US, the EU, and the UN were all started to protect human rights, even though all three have sometimes failed to implement or

have even forgotten their central purposes.⁶ And the end of communism in much of central and eastern Europe in the late twentieth century was largely a result of the people of the region asserting their dignity and subjectivity as human beings; this assertion of dignity and subjectivity led to the recognition of basic rights, matters such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of assembly.⁷

Surely all people of good will must rejoice that so many people are investing so much time, energy, and money into the search for human dignity and the attempt to protect human rights. It is surely much better to attempt to become a saint without God than to become a villain or criminal against humanity without God. Almost all of us can see that there is a huge difference between Adolph Hitler, Joseph Stalin, or Pol Pot on the one hand and Mother Teresa or Corrie ten Boom on the other hand, and we would prefer to live in a world influenced by the examples of Mother Teresa and Corrie ten Boom. But it would be cowardly to refuse to consider the big questions about life, Truth, and the universe which are raised by atrocities and the irrepressible humane response of attempting to protect human life and rights.

Let me again state my perspective: human atrocities and the responding human rights movements are best understood in the light of the description of life and the world which arises from the Christian Bible. There are

several big questions about life and the universe that are raised by human evil and our responses that call for justice and mercy; these questions find the best answers in the biblical message, and the biblical message even explains why we ask these questions. From the time of Adam and Eve, God has been pursuing the sons and daughters of Adam and Eve by means of questions that are somewhat like his question in the Garden of Eden: “Where are you?” Through the acknowledgement of human evil and the responding human rights movement, some ultimate questions require our attention. Why do we have an awareness of a standard for human behavior? What is it about us humans that gives us rights different from those of an insect? Why do we so frequently destroy each other? Is even the “saint without God” really responding to God’s moral demand built into the world and human consciousness? The Bible not only gives credible answers to these questions; it also explains why we can hardly avoid asking such questions.

There are at least four big questions that require answers.

1. Why Do We Know the Difference between Good and Evil?

It is common to think that everyone but a psychopath knows there is a difference between good and evil. Even though a philosopher or novelist can easily say that if God does not exist, then everything is permitted, in prac-

tice almost all normal people draw back and think that some things are really wrong, while other things are really right.

Many years ago, when I was a nasty young lecturer in philosophy, I played a philosophical trick on a young woman in an ethics class I taught. She wrote a course essay in which she argued brilliantly that all ethical concerns were a matter of taste; just as some people like ice cream while others like candy, some people like one set of actions while others like another set of actions. It clearly followed from her essay that it is equally good to like genocide or to like protecting human rights. My nasty trick was to write on her paper, "Excellent essay; failure." She was quite angry when she came to see me a few days later. "How can you fail me if I wrote an excellent essay?" she almost screamed. I calmly responded, "It tasted good. Ethics is a matter of taste." "But a good paper deserves a good grade!!" she huffed. With a bored glance I responded, "You convinced me. Everything is relative." "BUT THERE ARE RULES!! GOOD PAPERS GET GOOD GRADES!! EVEN PROFESSORS HAVE TO FOLLOW THE RULES!!" And then the light went on in her mind. Her anger at me showed her that she did not really believe the things she had written in her philosophy essay. She really thought (contrary to everything she had written) that we all know a lot about right and wrong and there are real standards of proper behavior that are different from matters of taste. I gave her a

good grade for what she learned, but her whole relativistic philosophy of life was broken to pieces. Like most people, she not only believed in a standard of right and wrong (in spite of what she said she believed); she also knew that I knew the same standard of right and wrong. Her denial of a standard of right and wrong was only a fashionable game she was playing. By losing her game, she may have begun to recover her soul.

I wish I could claim that this philosophical trick was my own idea; honesty requires that I say I learned it from C. S. Lewis.⁸ This trick shows something important about our moral knowledge; with Lewis, I would claim it also shows something very important about our selves and about the nature of the universe. And these truths about moral knowledge, our selves, and the nature of the universe are best explained by the biblical account of God, the moral law, and human fallenness.

Lewis invited people to notice the structure of any argument between two people. Simply put, I will consistently argue that I have done the right thing while you have done the wrong thing, while you can be expected to argue that you have done the right thing while I have done the wrong thing. Almost never, in any real argument, does anyone say anything like "There is no standard of proper behavior" or "We can't know right and wrong." Both parties to an argument assume that there is a real difference between right and wrong and that we all have reasonably good knowledge of the standard of right and

wrong. I was testing this claim of Lewis in the philosophical trick I played on the young woman in my ethics class, and I thought that Lewis's claim passed the test.

Of course, as Lewis knew, many people do not believe there is a moral law (which he also called the natural law or the law of human nature). Some claim that what Lewis and I are calling a moral law is only an instinct or a social custom, but those people have not really thought about their own moral experience or what they are saying. Of course we have instincts, but we are also normally aware of something outside our instincts telling us which instincts we should obey and which we should disobey; that is the moral law.⁹ Of course we have social customs, but we are also aware that we can and must evaluate different customs (e.g., should we or should we not practice genocide?) on the basis of some higher standard; that is the moral law.

At this point in the discussion, we all become rather uneasy, for we can hardly avoid the question of where this moral law comes from. Should we conclude that our moral knowledge is based on a real moral law that exists outside our minds? Then consistency will strongly push us to conclude that God exists, that the moral law exists in his mind, and that he has created us in such a way that there is some reflection or image of his law in our minds, even though we sometimes wander in the dark on moral issues. If we do not want to conclude that God really exists, then consistency

will push us to say and think that there is no real difference between good and evil.

For at least a few hundred years, the so-called "Problem of Evil" has been a continuous objection to Christian belief that one encounters in almost every western introduction to philosophy. A classical form of the claim comes from the Scottish philosopher David Hume. He asked, "Is God willing to prevent evil and unable? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both willing and able? Whence then is evil?"¹⁰ Using arguments like this, many thoughtless people have claimed that the existence of real evil in the world somehow makes belief in God impossible or more difficult. But this is silly. Such people have never considered what would have to follow if God does not exist; they should spend a day or two reading Camus. If God does not exist, we would not be able to say "This is evil" and really mean anything by what we said. For if God does not exist, there is no standard of evaluation to say if something is good or evil; all we could say is that some people like it and others do not like it. A real evaluation that something is evil depends on having a standard that is beyond the opinions of one person or one group of people. Was the Holocaust evil? Hitler and his friends thought it was good. If you think it was truly evil, you must assume there is a standard outside the differing opinions of people; without thinking about it, you have probably assumed that this standard exists in the

mind of God and that the human mind can somehow learn something from the mind of God. Do you think it was truly evil that Stalin caused the deaths of about 100 million people? Stalin and his friends probably thought it was good. In order to disagree in an intelligent manner, you must think there is a standard of right and wrong beyond mere human disagreements which we can know at least in part. In order to say that 100 million murders is evidence of real evil, we all very naturally assume knowledge of a standard or rule of right and wrong which is above our changing opinions. We all assume a certain amount of moral knowledge which comes from God as part of his moral law built into human consciousness; it is part of being created so that our minds are in the image of God's mind.

The fact that most normal people can recognize the difference between good and evil and call the actions of a Hitler or Stalin truly evil, is, I think, a strong indicator of the existence of God and the truthfulness of the biblical description of human life. For me, the "Problem of Evil" is not how a good and omnipotent God can allow suffering. For me, the real problem of evil is how a real difference between good and evil could both exist and be recognized by us if God did not exist. Our normal recognition of evil, including the massive human rights movement dedicated to reducing evil, is possible only because God exists and we have at least some God-given knowledge of right and wrong.¹¹

After thinking deeply about human wickedness, Camus initially recommended becoming saints without God. But then he reconsidered this most basic question. Why not?

2. What Is So Distinctive about Humans That We Have Rights?

The atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell clarified the question very nicely:

If men developed by such slow stages that there were creatures which we should not know whether to classify as human or not, the question arises: at what stage in evolution did men, or their semi-human ancestors begin to be all equal? . . . A resolute equalitarian . . . will be forced to regard apes as equals of human beings. And why stop with apes? I do not see how he is able to resist arguments in favor of Votes for Oysters.¹²

Of course, Russell was totally facetious in his mention of "Votes for Oysters." But what is it about humans that makes us so different that humans have a dignity or rights or a value that oysters do not have. Or that insects do not have? Or that bacteria do not have?¹³

Bertrand Russell was writing at a time in western culture when many thoughtful people were beginning to realize they did not know what a human being is. At earlier times in western history, as I interpret that history, most people in western culture had some ideas about makes us human or what gives humans their distinctive dignity. Many (though not all) people, even if they were not

personally Christians, had views about human beings that were heavily influenced by the biblical message. Different people used different terms to describe this distinctive value of human life, whether in terms of humans possessing an immortal soul or having God-given inalienable rights or by talking about the image of God in mankind; all these ways of talking and thinking were heavily influenced by different parts of the Bible. But in the early twentieth century, this influence of the Bible on western culture began to disappear. Under the influence of atheistic versions of evolutionary theory, some people began to say there is nothing distinctive about humans that would give us special dignity or special rights.¹⁴ Under the influence of behaviorist theories in psychology and the other social sciences, some even talked as if personal decision-making is only a façade.¹⁵ Freud and his followers talked as if humans are only a bundle of instincts, mostly sexual instincts, while the various followers of Nietzsche thought the will to power makes us human. So what makes us human? Does anyone know? Or is there anything that is distinctly human? Is there any difference between a human and anything else in the universe?

Frances Schaeffer talked about a “line of despair” in western history; after centuries of optimism about finding truth, sometime in the early twentieth century, people in the west began to despair of truth, meaning, morality, and understanding humanness. Bertrand Russell

was clearly a man who lived below the line of despair. Like many others, he thought human life was a cosmic accident with no particular significance or value. He wanted a humane way of life, but he had terrible troubles trying to say what it is that makes us human.

I have told a bit of the story of how difficult it is for people in western culture to say what it is that makes human life so distinctive that humans have rights that insects and oysters do not have. It would be valuable to tell similar stories about how different cultures around the globe are struggling to define humanness; it is a global question. Is there really a difference between humanity and nature?¹⁶ What is it?

We should be clear about the significance of this question. If there is no difference between killing a million people who are perceived as a threat to my or to our interests and killing a million insects that are a threat to my or to our interests, then there is no basis for a worldwide human rights movement. The entire human rights movement makes sense only on the assumption that there is a real difference between humans and the rest of nature. But what is that difference? Do we have to end in despair? Must we simply say that “it tastes better” to protect humans than to protect insects or bacteria? But then most of the great criminals against humanity thought it somehow pleasant or desirable to kill many human beings.

I do not think we have to despair about clarifying a significant moral

difference between humans and other entities. At the very least, most of us have everyday experiences and relationships that almost force us to conclude that human beings are distinct from the rest of the world and somehow special in the world. I like our family dog and even talk to her, but I know directly and certainly that our dog is fundamentally different from my children or my wife. We have direct awareness that humans are distinct and special in the universe. We experience ourselves, including our thoughts, hopes, and anxieties, knowing that other people have similar thoughts, hopes, and anxieties; this leads us very naturally to conclude that we are different from a bird or an insect.¹⁷ And it is easy to start listing some important differences between humans and other animals or objects. People think, talk, create, imagine, have deep relationships, and make value decisions in a way that nothing else does. Our dog has never asked me a theological or philosophical question; my children started asking the big questions about life as soon as they could talk. Part of our humanness surely must be the ability to ask the big questions and wonder about the universe; I think we are the only residents of planet earth who do these things.

Such everyday experiences make me think there is good reason to say that humans are distinct in our world, in contradiction with what some think they have learned from Darwin, Skinner, or Freud. We should doubt any academic theory that stands in conflict with the one area of knowledge about

which we have inside knowledge, being human. Any religious or philosophical theory about humanness should explain my inside knowledge of what it means to be human; such theories should not ask me to deny my internal and direct knowledge of being human.

The description of humanness given in the Bible is worthy of serious consideration, even by people who are not Christians or Jews. In the opening sections of the Bible we are told:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground." Genesis 1:26–28.

It is probably impossible to prove exactly when and how God did this; this is at the very beginning of history, so there were not many reporters around to write articles for their newspapers. But this is not silly nonsense; it is a profound but simple answer to one of our biggest questions: "What are we?" The words "image of God" and "likeness of God" (typical Hebrew poetic parallelism that likes repetition) do not

give us a lot of detail, but they do tell us that humans are something like God, the ultimate Ground of the universe. There is something in humans that is analogous to (an image or reflection of) God himself. Can anything deeper be said? This description of human life would not contradict our other observations about humans, such as having reason, creativity, the ability to communicate, or significant relationships. This description of humans as created in the image of God would be an explanation of why these other descriptions of human beings are also true.

Some of the works of God seem to be completely continuous with what he has long been doing, whereas other works of God are new initiatives that decisively change or break previous patterns of events. God allowed the sun to rise this morning, and that was completely continuous with what he has done for many mornings in the past; the resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning was an act of God that decisively changed the previous course of what normally happens. It is worthy of notice that the account of the creation of humans in the image of God uses terminology that shows a decisive change with the previous acts of God. The rich Hebrew vocabulary has words to describe the acts of God that suggest continuity with what had previously happened, and these words are used to describe some aspects of the creation. But the writer selected words that suggest a decisive change from everything else when the creation of humans in the image of God

was proclaimed. This fits with what we should all know about humans: our bodies are not so extremely different from those of many apes, and our DNA is similar to that of many animals; yet there is something decisively different about humans. While our bodies may be similar to those of a chimpanzee or a gorilla, our hearts and minds reflect the heart and mind of the Creator. And that is what is so distinctive about humans that we have a special dignity and responsibility in the universe. That God-given dignity and responsibility is the reason why humans have rights that are different from the rights of any other entity in the universe.

Careful observation of our daily experiences of ourselves and other people should give us a significant knowledge of the fact of human distinctiveness in the world. But that knowledge is easily distorted or lost. The biblical explanation that humans are created in the image of God, the ultimate Ground and Source of all beings, can deepen, protect, and clarify our knowledge of what a human being is. This is the foundation for human dignity and human rights.

3. Why Do We Need to Be Protected from Each Other?

It is inspirational to talk about human dignity; this is a topic we like. But we must never forget why this whole discussion has arisen: people regularly and repeatedly destroy other people, often using the power of the state or other powerful institutions to accomplish the

greatest evils. And as part of this insidious pattern, the classic criminals against humanity often use deceptive words to explain to their followers and friends why their actions are good or necessary. The entire human rights movement is a gigantic protest against human nature as it is. The very existence of the human rights movement stands as an indictment against mankind: we are the type of beings who murder our own and occasionally even boast that in so doing we have done something good. The human rights movement shows the massive extent to which humanity is characteristically divided against itself: the light side of human nature is the bearer of the greatest dignity in creation and has been enlightened with knowledge of right and wrong; this allows humans to fight against the dark side of our nature which sometimes takes sick pleasure or finds pride in killing and destruction. Humanity is the greatest self-contradiction in the universe; but why?

Going to the early chapters of the Bible, we find the story of Cain killing Abel:

Adam lay with his wife Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain. She said, "With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man." Later she gave birth to his brother Abel.

Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the

firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it."

Now Cain said to his brother Abel, "Let's go out to the field." And while they were in the field, Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him. Genesis 4: 1-8

This early account of a murder has stimulated commentators for centuries. Much of that discussion must be left for another time. It is valuable for our discussion to notice that from very early times in human history people were making a clear distinction between killing a person and killing an animal (in this case for religious worship), in spite of the obvious physical similarities between humans and animals and the similarity in the process of killing humans and animals. It is probably more valuable to notice that this early murder of a man was an expression of anger at God. Cain was angry at God because God had not accepted his sacrifice; it was very difficult for Cain to directly attack God, but it was not so difficult to attack someone who was a mirror image of God and who seemed to be a friend of God. The background

of this earliest murder was *religious frustration*: hostility toward God that gets misdirected toward people. This is a key to understanding human rights problems, as well as some steps toward their management.

It is easy for the observer to notice that various types of religious frustration contribute to different types of human rights abuses. Frequently an entire people group has been persecuted because of its beliefs, whether that people group is Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Muslim, or whatever. The presence of an articulated religious system makes a people into a distinct target for people who have all sorts of hostilities and frustrations. Think of these persecuted people as being represented by Abel; their number is massive. The persecution of a religious group is rarely purely religious. Such persecutions are often mixed with ethnic hatred, economic envy, personal grudges, nationalistic zeal, and a range of other dark motives. The people committing the crimes are often broadly frustrated with life. And the well-identified religious community, religious institution, or religious leader becomes the target for violence or discrimination. Frustration with life turns into aggression toward a person or group who might be close to God. Those represented by Abel are murdered too often.

There are also those religiously frustrated people represented by Cain. Their religion or religion substitute (such as Communism, National Socialism, and various other political ideolo-

gies) makes some people or the entire movement hostile toward others and may also provide some explanation why another group of people should be hindered or destroyed. These religions or religious/political ideologies have within their doctrine and ethics certain ideas, claims, examples, or principles that explain why all other people or certain other people should be repressed, expelled, or killed. Sometimes the despised or second-class humans are identified by race, sometimes by religion, or sometimes by social class. These religions and ideologies can be grouped together as giving organized expression to internal religious frustrations, similar to those of Cain. Their religion has not provided peace with God, with themselves, or with other people. The observable results around the world are gruesome.

It is for good reason that freedom of religion is sometimes described as the “first freedom” or the “mother of human rights.” The society that has learned how to protect a very extensive freedom of religion is also learning how to manage its own religious frustrations which are the root cause of many other abuses of human rights. And once those religious frustrations are largely managed, it is much easier to take steps to protect the full range of human rights. Biblical realism about human nature lets us see that protecting the freedom of religion will often also lead to the practical protection of a wide range of other human rights. Of course, real freedom of religion is both individual and collective;

this means both individuals and whole communities must be allowed to give full expression to their faith.¹⁸

Having a deep religious need is close to the center of what makes us human; if God created us in the reflection or image of his heart and mind, it is only natural that one of our deepest drives or instincts will be for a relationship with God. When Augustine prayed, “Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you,” he was not only confessing his own desire for God.¹⁹ He was describing a central element of what makes us human. Even though he did not believe in God, philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach claimed that what makes people human is the fact that they are religious. “Religion has its basis in the essential difference between man and the brute – the brutes have no religion.” (The word “brute” meant animal).²⁰ Protecting religious freedom is very close to protecting the mystery or essence of humanness.

We need to be protected from each other and from our most powerful institutions because humans have an inherited tendency to destroy each other. That tendency to destroy is closely associated with religious frustration; it often arises out of a dysfunctional religion and/or it may be directed at people insofar as they are identified by their religious beliefs and practice. Understanding that the sources of human rights abuses are very closely connected to religious persecution gives us significant direction in knowing a first step that needs

to be taken to reduce human rights abuses. That first step will often be for a society to allow people real and substantial freedom of religion.²¹ And on an individual level, we need to address our own religious frustration, our own alienation from God.

4. How Do We Know?

This important question can and should be asked about every important knowledge claim. Here we are especially asking how we know that there is a moral law distinguishing good and evil, how we know that humans are distinct from other creatures, how we know that we must be protected from each other. We cannot avoid the question of how we know these things to be true, especially when many people and cultures make contradictory claims to know many different things.

We know these matters in two ways. The two ways of knowing are alike in terms of the ultimate source of the knowledge; it comes from God. The two ways of knowing are different in terms of how that knowledge comes to us, whether through creation or through special revelation in the Bible. And the two ways of knowing are different in terms of the extent to which a person (or a culture) can reject this knowledge.

Historically, evangelical Christians have said there are two ways in which God makes himself known to the human race: special revelation, meaning God’s special communica-

tion through the Bible and Christ, and creational revelation, meaning God's speech through creation.

Christian believers should acknowledge the Bible as a unique gift of God; there we find the words of eternal life, the good news about Christ. This is a revelation, a self-revealing communication, that is truly special and distinct. And while some people may be hesitant to clearly confess their highest authority, Christians should not be hesitant to confess the Bible as our highest authority.²² In the Bible we are told about human dignity, human wickedness, and the existence of a moral law that allows us to distinguish between good and evil. These themes are not truly the center of special revelation, because the center of the Bible is the good news about Jesus; but the themes of human dignity, human fallenness, and the moral law are essential themes that allow us to comprehend the good news about Jesus. These themes are also crucial to life in society, and many people who do not yet believe in Jesus are influenced by the biblical teaching on human nature and the moral law.

We should also acknowledge that God speaks through creation, and everything other than God is part of his creation. The apostle Paul commented on this general revelation or speech of God through creation, as well as on the ambiguous response that many people have to this type of revelation from God.

For the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and injustice of men who suppress the truth by means of injustice, since the knowledge of God is plain in them; for God has made himself known to them. His invisible characteristics are received into consciousness through the creation of the world, namely his invisible power and divine nature, so that people are without an apology. Although they knew God, they did not glorify him or give thanks to him, but became worthless in their thoughts and their senseless hearts were darkened. . . . They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant, and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, disloyal, lacking in normal affections, and merciless. They know the requirement of God that those who do such things are worthy of death, but they not only do these things, they also approve those who do them. Romans 1:18–32, selections.²³

As the apostle Paul describes the human condition, people know much more about God than they would like to know. Whether or not people want it, like it, or acknowledge it, they have a significant amount of knowledge about God and his moral law. People know at least a little about his invisible characteristics, such as mercy and justice, even if they claim to be atheists. People know at least a little about God's moral law, even if they pretend not to know there is a moral law or a God who is the Source of that moral law.

The hero of Camus's novel could pretend to try to become a "saint without God." Ironically, that attempt is possible only because all people have some God-given knowledge of right and wrong. God has written parts of his moral law into the human heart and mind, and he is continually refreshing that knowledge through his ongoing general revelation. This is what is sometimes called "the natural moral law," meaning God's moral law as it is communicated to us through nature, which is his creation. The moral law is what makes the entire human rights movement possible, for the moral law tells all people that we should do unto others as we would like them to do to us, and it also tells us that we have a duty to protect the weak and defenseless. We should see the human rights movement as a response to God's moral law revealed in his creation, even if many do not want to recognize the real source of their moral knowledge.

Genocide, the Holocaust, and numerous crimes against humanity have occurred partly because of psychopathic tyrants and inhumane ideologies. Men and women of good will should take their duties more seriously, including the duties to do unto others as we would have them do unto us and to protect the weak and defenseless. This will lead to more effective work to protect human rights. We should also acknowledge the Source of that moral demand, which is also the Source of the human dignity we should seek to protect. We also need to acknowledge that there is something like Cain in all of us, for which we need

forgiveness. Genocide, the Holocaust, and crimes against humanity are only extreme forms of tendencies we all have within us, a very sobering thought.

A Challenge with Two Sides

If you call yourself a Christian, the challenge for you is to recognize that protecting the lives of people made in the image of God is a God-given responsibility. It is best if our efforts are guided by serious moral thinking informed by the Bible and the history of Christian ethics, which is one of the purposes of this little book, so we may avoid some of the well-meaning mistakes that some have made. Not all people have the same gifts and talents, so not all have to do the same thing or take up this responsibility in the same manner. Some might be called to become human rights lawyers or journalists, both of which callings will require significant training and education. But all can assist in some way, and some of these ways will be discussed in following chapters.

If you are very concerned about human rights or perhaps have even sacrificed or suffered to protect the rights of your neighbors, the challenge for you is to consider those things you know but may prefer not to know. You can attempt to become a saint without God only because of God-given knowledge about right and wrong and about the dignity of human beings created in God's image. Please consider the serious

possibility that you are both responding to God's demand for justice while you are also trying to hide from God himself. Why should you continue to hide? It seems to me that the human rights

movement can be strengthened by some serious moral reflection that consciously occurs *before God*.

Annotation Anmerkungen

¹Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York: Modern Library, 1948), p. 229.

²Camus began his essay, "The Myth of Sisyphus: An Absurd Reasoning," with the claim, "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy." This has the distinct ring of an autobiographical reflection; apparently many committed suicide after coming face-to-face with radical evil in his time. Camus recommended the effort to continue to struggle for a humane way of life as a protest against the absurdity of life.

³Albert Camus, *L'Éte*, quoted by James Sire, *The Universe Next Door: A Basic Worldview Catalog*, Third Edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), p. 95. My interpretation of Camus and French existentialism is dependent on James Sire and on C. Stephen Evans, *Existentialism: The Philosophy of Despair and the Quest for Hope* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

⁴Some of Camus's personal story is told by Howard Mumma, *Albert Camus and the Minister* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Paraclete Press, 2000). Most of what was known about Camus's progress toward accepting the Christian faith could not be told until long after his death, because Howard Mumma was bound by his vows of pastoral confidentiality. This citation of Mumma's book is not an endorsement of the way Mumma demythologized parts of the Bible.

⁵On April 12, 2008. This number was only in English. There are millions of other documents in other languages. On that date Google found 3,190,000 items to read in German and 890,000 documents in the rather small Dutch language. If one only read Dutch, there would be enough reading on the subject of human rights to last several lifetimes.

⁶An excellent general account of the human rights movement is Geoffrey Robertson QC, *Crimes against Humanity: The Struggle for Global Justice* (London: Penguin Books, first edition 1999, third edition 2006), 759 pages. Robertson sometimes misinterprets classical natural law which was influenced by Christianity. One example is the way in which he mistakenly makes a close connection between natural law ethics and the supposed "Divine Right of Kings," which was used to support inhumane tyranny at times in western history.

⁷After living in formerly communist countries for fourteen years, I think that much of what caused the widespread, mostly peaceful revolt against communism in the late twentieth century was a different conception or perception of what a person is. The communist authorities largely saw people as objects to be controlled or used; the people experienced themselves as creative subjects who needed freedom of speech, freedom to travel, and freedom of assembly in order to reach their potential. For some, freedom of religion was a crucial reason to replace communism.

⁸ My trick was inspired by reading the first part of *Mere Christianity*, where Lewis points out that moral conflicts show that our real moral knowledge may be very different from what some say they think. For a better presentation of these ideas, please read the first part of Lewis's book, which is available in various editions in English and also in various other languages.

⁹ We may also be aware at times that one of our instincts is either too weak or too strong.

¹⁰ This discussion occurs in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, which he finished writing in 1776 and which was published posthumously in 1779. It is available in a variety of editions, and excerpts are included in many anthologies of important texts in western philosophy.

¹¹ It seems to me that there are usually two types of people who are seriously interested in the so-called "Problem of Evil" as a reason to reject Christian belief. The first type of person has been so deeply hurt by human suffering that he or she is continually angry at God; for this person, the Problem of Evil is an expression of anger at God. What better way to tell God how angry you are than to tell him he does not exist? Of course, this emotional reaction shows that people can hardly avoid some knowledge of God. The second type of person uses the Problem of Evil as an intellectual game to avoid an honest confrontation with God; the nature of the game shows that the real problem is the sinful desire to avoid God, not an intellectual problem with Christian belief.

¹² Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1946), pp. 697–698. Quoted by Howard Taylor, *Human Rights: Its Culture and Moral Confusions* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2004), p. 50.

¹³ I read a recent news report about a Swiss government ethics committee that is debating whether or not flowers have an inherent dignity which requires they not be cut. The very fact that this type of discussion occurs probably shows a lack of clarity about the difference in dignity between human life and non-human life. Because it is God's creation, people whose lives and thinking are guided by the Bible should be very responsible in their stewardship of the creation and should want to avoid unneeded cruelty to ani-

mals, while we are also very clear that humans have a dignity different from the rest of creation because humans are created in the image of God. Some parts of the environmental movement have lost sight of the distinctive dignity of humans.

¹⁴ For sake of honesty, we must mention that there are some people, including prominent natural scientists, who believe most of evolutionary theory but insist that there is such a prominent difference between humans and non-human animals that one has to think that God specially intervened in the process of evolution to make humans decisively different from anything that came before. See Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief* (Free Press, 2006). Every culture has a story of origins which it tells as an alternative to the Genesis creation account; this makes me wonder how much of the evolutionary story is just one more story of origins, written by leading representatives of a natural science-oriented culture.

¹⁵ Here I am especially thinking of the influence of B. F. Skinner. The title of his most important book shows much of what he thought: *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*.

¹⁶ The way of phrasing these questions, as well as the overview of the problem in western culture, is partly dependent on Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, pp. 326–332.

¹⁷ I think these experiences are God-given and are part of God's general revelation, which will be described further below.

¹⁸ Real freedom of religion must include such matters as freedom of speech that arise from a person's or a community's basic beliefs, e.g., freedom to educate one's children in light of one's faith, freedom to gather with fellow believers, freedom to own or rent suitable buildings or facilities for such activities. Real freedom of religion contains within it real freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly, freedom to travel, and freedom of education.

¹⁹ This is the opening line in the famous *Confessions* of Saint Augustine (354–430), bishop of Hippo, which is in today's Algeria. This valuable book is available in various English translations and in many other languages.

²⁰Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–1872) was a German atheist philosopher of religion. Some of his ideas were later adopted by Karl Marx and by Sigmund Freud, making him one of the important sources of modern European atheism. Very ironically, some of his central ideas were in his book *The Essence of Christianity*, which is an attack on Christian belief. The quotation is the opening statement of this book, which is available in various editions and languages; it is also included in many anthologies of western philosophy.

²¹In Europe and North America, it is common to hear the claim that anyone with a clear set of beliefs will automatically want to force other people to accept those beliefs, even if violence or force is required to impose those beliefs on others. Therefore, it is claimed, skepticism or the denial of ultimate truth is needed for peace in the world. Ironically, in this manner skeptics and

nihilists attempt to coerce others to accept their belief system. As evangelicals, we insist that God is the One who convinces people of the truth of the gospel by means of his Word and Spirit, so that we renounce any use of force, violence, or coercion to convince people of the truth of the gospel. We trust in the testimony of the Holy Spirit to the truth in Christ, while we joyfully limit ourselves to using peaceful persuasion.

²²Everyone has a highest authority in his or her life, even if some people do not have the level of authenticity needed to articulate their highest authority.

²³My own translation, as published in “Paul’s Intellectual Courage in the Face of Sophisticated Unbelief,” MBS Text 63, available at www.bucer.eu.

The Author

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Thomas K. Johnson received his Ph.D. in ethics from the University of Iowa (1987) after being a research scholar at Eberhard Karls Universität (Tübingen). He has an ACPE from Missouri Baptist Hospital (St. Louis, 1981), a Master of Divinity (*Magna Cum Laude*) from Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, 1981), and a BA (*Cum Laude*) from Hope College (Michigan, 1977). He is a pastor of the Presbyterian Church in America and planted Hope Evangelical Church (PCA) in Iowa. Johnson was adjunct professor of philosophy at Kirkwood College 1991–1994; visiting professor at the European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus, 1994–1996. (UHU is a dissident, anti-Communist university, forced into exile by the Belarusian dictator in 2004.) Since 1996 he and his wife have lived in Prague, Czech Republic, where he taught philosophy at Anglo-American University (4 years) and at Charles University (8 ½ years). He is MBS Professor of Apologetics and Ethics (2003) and Vice President for Research (2007). His wife, Leslie P. Johnson, is director of the Christian International School of Prague.

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