

Scholar: 'Human Dignity' Rare Before Christianity

In the modern West, we generally take for granted that human persons have an inherent dignity and worth that forms the basis for human rights. The very first clause of the preamble to the UN's [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) reads: "Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world..."

In fact, however, the idea of human dignity cannot be taken for granted. As theologian David Bentley Hart powerfully [argued in a recent article](#), "human dignity is a rarity before Christianity":

"But our modern notion that there is such a thing as innate human worth, residing in every individual of every class and culture, is at best the very late consequence of a cultural, conceptual, and moral revolution that erupted many centuries earlier, and in the middle of a world that was anything but hospitable to its principles."

There's reason to believe that human dignity could become a rarity again in a post-Christian world. Both the idea of human dignity and its concrete realization require a certain sort of worldview, which in turn requires reasoned support that isn't always apparent.

Part of the problem is that the global hegemony of the West, and thus of its better values, is gradually drawing to a close. China, an ancient civilization that never shared the Western view of the human person, has reversed centuries of decline and war on its way to becoming a superpower that could well supplant the United States. Militant Islamism, whose deity is not bound by love or morality as the West has long

understood them, has become an active and global threat. We are moving toward a multipolar world in which consensus about values is dissipating.

Science isn't much help here. Evolutionary biology encourages the belief that distinctively human capacities and traits differ only in degree, not in kind, from those of primates in general. Neuroscience encourages the belief that our thoughts are but neural firings and that our choices and actions are largely or wholly predetermined, so that "free will" is illusory. Sociology encourages the belief that human collective behavior is mostly explicable in terms of gender, race, class, and perceived economic interests. Admittedly, not everybody who's aware of such beliefs accepts them—at least not without serious qualifications. But enough do accept them to enable us to say that we no longer *assume* any conception of human nature that would justify saying that human persons have *inherent* dignity and worth. Many Westerners now believe that people have only such rights as they choose, provisionally, to grant each other.

Fortunately, there's also good reason to believe that the idea of inherent human dignity is not about to go away. In his 2008 book [*The Meaning of the West: An Apologia for Secular Christianity*](#), atheist theologian Don Cupitt noted what is also historically undeniable:

"Nobody in the West can be wholly non-Christian. We cannot help continuing to be influenced by the old dreams, as for example Marxists, anarchists, utopians, Martin Luther King, John Lennon, and Jürgen Habermas were when they all continued to pursue some version of the old biblical vision of a fully reconciled, free and open future society, the messianic Kingdom here on this earth. Whether or not you personally think of yourself as being a Christian does not very much affect the extent to which Christianity goes on influencing your hopes and your dreams... You may call yourself a non-Christian, but the dreams you dream are still Christian

dreams, and you continue to be part of the history of Christianity. That's your fate. You may consider yourself secular, but the modern Western secular world is itself a Christian creation."

Hart's piece very much supports that view:

"Raised in shadow of the Christian world, inheritors of its moral grammar and imagination, we no longer enjoy the luxury of a capacity for innocent cruelty. Living as we do in the long aftermath of a revolution whose effects linger deep in our souls and natures, we cannot guilelessly look away from the abasement of the victim and fix our eyes in admiration upon his persecutor, no matter how grand the latter might be."