

## THE RECOGNITION OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN AFRICA: A CHRISTIAN ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY PERSPECTIVE

Etienne de Villiers  
Dogmatics and Christian Ethics  
University of Pretoria

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### Abstract

*This article attempts, first of all, to define the concept of human dignity in tandem with a Christian ethics of responsibility. The views on human dignity, held by some proponents of a Christian ethics of responsibility, and a number of South African and Dutch theologians who participated in two joint consultations, are discussed and critically evaluated. Second, this article addresses the following question: "What does taking responsibility for the recognition and effective enhancement of human dignity in Africa entail?" The question is answered by drawing out the implications of four principles of a Christian ethics of responsibility, for the recognition and effective enhancement of human dignity in Africa.*

**Key Words:** Ethics, Responsibility, Human Dignity, Max Weber, Apartheid

### Introduction

The saying "There is nothing new under the sun" is to some extent also true with regard to the violation and impairment of human dignity in Africa. Every example of such violation or impairment of human dignity found in Africa today, has occurred before in other parts of the world. On the one hand, there appears to be nothing unique about Africa when it comes to the violation and impairment of human dignity. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that the configuration of factors that have contributed to the violation and impairment of human dignity in Africa, and the sheer magnitude of the problem, are to some extent, unique.

The sheer magnitude of the problem and the failure to curtail it, has led to despondency among many role-players. 'Africa pessimism' is rife among leaders in Western governments and development agencies, but also among African leaders – political or otherwise. In the process, a lot of blame shifting has been done. Western leaders accuse African leaders of not taking adequate responsibility for introducing the necessary measures to prevent the violation and impairment of human dignity in their societies. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France even found it necessary, in a recent speech, to blame the lack of progress in African countries on the stubborn adherence of Africans to traditional African culture.<sup>1</sup> African leaders, on the other hand, blame Western leaders for promoting the interests of

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<sup>1</sup> In this speech made on 26 July 2007 in Senegal, President Sarkozy said that colonialism was not the cause of all of Africa's problems and denied that France had ever exploited an African country. He proceeded to say: "The tragedy of Africa is that the African had never really entered into history... They have never really launched themselves into the future... The African peasant, who for thousands of years has lived according to the seasons, whose life ideal was to be in harmony with nature, only knew the eternal renewal of time... In this imaginary world, where everything starts over and over again, there is room neither for human endeavour, nor for the idea of progress... The problem of Africa... is to be found here" (McGreal, 2007).

their own countries at the cost of the interests of African countries, even when they offer help to African governments.

Presently, the greatest threat to human dignity in Africa is that the relevant role-players do not appear to be making a constructive contribution in this regard, but appear to be sitting back and waiting on others to do so. This is true not only of political and economic leaders and leaders of NGO's in the Western world and in Africa, but also of the leaders of ethnic and cultural groups and religious denominations. There is also the serious risk that many African people, especially those who belong to ethnic and religious minorities and opposition parties, will see themselves, in the first instance, as victims who are completely at the mercy of others, and who have no control over their own lives.

In this article, I would like to address the issue concerning the need to recognise and enhance human dignity in Africa. The idea is not to provide a detailed blueprint of policies and actions that could be taken by the different role-players. Attention will rather be given to the underlying problem of responsibility. The problem can be formulated as such: What does taking responsibility with regard to the recognition and effective enhancement of human dignity in Africa entail? This problem will be discussed from the perspective of a Christian ethics of responsibility. The goal is to shed light on the nature and extent of the responsibility required to ensure that human dignity in Africa is recognised and effectively enhanced.

In order to achieve this goal, attention will first of all be given to a view of human dignity that is commendable from a theological perspective. Such a view should not be in conflict with the points of departure of a Christian ethics of responsibility. Therefore, I will devote the first part of my article to a discussion of human dignity from a theological point of view, together with a Christian ethics of responsibility. In the second part of the article, I will attempt to explicate more fully what it means to take responsibility for the recognition and effective enhancement of human dignity in an African context. It will be done in terms of a discussion of the implications of the main tenets of a Christian ethics of responsibility.

In dealing with this topic my main discussion partners will be two groups of theologians. The first group consists of four fellow-proponents of a Christian ethics of responsibility who have also written on the Christian concept of human dignity: Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Wolfgang Huber, Ulrich Körtner and Johannes Fischer. The second group consists of the participants in two consultations on human dignity held by the Faculty of Theology of the University of Stellenbosch and the previously called Theological University of Kampen, in October 2005 and August 2006. They are chosen as discussion partners to ensure continuity with previous discussions on human dignity in which South African theologians were involved.

### **An Appropriate Christian Concept of Human Dignity**

The concept of human dignity, like those of human rights and responsibility, belongs to those concepts that to some extent have their roots in traditional Christian beliefs and ideas. However, these three concepts only gained their distinctiveness under the influence of new developments and philosophical ideas at the advent of modernity. The newness of these concepts is reflected by the fact that the terms 'human dignity', 'human rights' and 'responsibility' only came into general usage after the advent of modernity. As a result of differences in content between these concepts and traditional Christian beliefs it would, on the one hand, be unacceptable for Christians to uncritically embrace these concepts, or to claim them as part of their Christian heritage. As a result of certain analogies to traditional

Christian beliefs, there is on the other hand, also no reason for Christians to reject them out of hand. They have to take into account that they form an indispensable part of the conceptual *instrumentarium* of contemporary ethical discourse. One can scarcely take part in discussions on some important contemporary ethical issues without making use of these concepts.

It is conspicuous that the theologian who developed the first version of a Christian ethics of responsibility, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in spite of sharp criticism of the heritage of the Enlightenment, endorsed the concept of human dignity: “The Enlightenment was perfectly correct in pointing out that the ethical is not concerned with an abstract social order, with representatives of particular social classes, with ‘above’ and ‘below’ as such, but with *people*. It is consequently also correct in the passion with which it insists on the *equal dignity of all people* as ethical beings” (Bonhoeffer, 2005:374).

With the phrase ‘equal dignity of all people’ Bonhoeffer captures the essence of the modern concept of human dignity. What is new in modernity is not so much that the dignity of human beings is recognised, but that in all societies, in the past, some groups of people or individuals were regarded to have higher dignity (‘*dignitas*’). Such groups or individuals were therefore deemed to deserve more honour or esteem than others, on account of their birth, race, class, caste or personal merit. This differentiating concept of dignity is still in use in contemporary societies, although it has been personalised and is more strongly associated with personal merit (cf. De Lange, 2007; Huber, 1996). The concept of human dignity that has become dominant in modernity and has relativised the differentiating, societal concept of dignity, entails a dignity that all human beings equally share. This human dignity is regarded to be inviolable, inalienable and inherent in all human beings (cf. Wolbert, 2007). On account of it, all people deserve equal respect from fellow human beings and institutions, such as the state. It is especially in the recognition of the equal dignity of all people and the abolition of all discriminatory political and societal structures that the distinctive nature of the modern concept of human dignity is highlighted. Approximations of the modern concept of human dignity were already formulated earlier in the history of humankind. The Stoics, for example, already learned that all people share the same nature and therefore have equal dignity. However, as a result of their deterministic world view, they did not translate this insight into a political ethics of equal treatment for all people and the abolition of discriminatory institutions such as slavery (cf. De Villiers, 1984).

In what way do human beings share a special dignity that distinguishes them from other creatures? Two main answers have been provided in history: i) their possession of reason and ii) their being created in the image of God.<sup>2</sup> Already Cicero referred to human beings’ participation in reason as the foundation of their special dignity (*De inventione* II; *De officiis*). In the Enlightenment, the connection of human dignity and reason became something of an axiom. A typical example is provided by Samuel Pufendorf who asserted that the dignity of human beings consists in the immortality of the soul and the fact that they are gifted with the light of reason (*De iure naturae et gentium* II,1,§ 5, 1672). However, Immanuel Kant provided the classical and most influential Enlightenment foundation of human dignity in human reason, or more accurately, in human autonomy. In his *The fundamental principles of the metaphysics of ethics* Kant asserts that dignity has to

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<sup>2</sup> That does not mean that no other approaches to the definition of the concept of human dignity can be identified. Johannes Fischer identifies four contemporary approaches in defining human dignity (Fischer 2007:348-352).

be ascribed to what is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent. What has no equivalent, should as a result, never be treated as only a means to achieve an end, but should be recognised and treated as an end in itself. The condition for being treated as end in itself is autonomy, self-determination in freedom, which is – according to Kant – the core of morality. As only rational beings can be autonomous, therefore only rational beings can be regarded as ends in themselves. The inevitable conclusion is that only human beings, who are the only rational beings we have experience of, have dignity (Kant, 1938).

Kant's view of human dignity has been criticised by some Christian ethicists. Johannes Fischer is of the opinion that taking the point of departure with regard to human dignity in autonomy does not help us much when we have to decide on moral issues such as the killing of redundant embryos in the case of in-vitro fertilisation. Such a concept of human dignity just does not seem to be applicable in cases like these. He is also of the opinion that Kant's concept of human dignity is too broad, because on the basis of it we have to consider that in all cases where people lie to one another, there is a violation of human dignity, because the person being lied to is being treated as means to an end. Intuitively, most of us would prefer to reserve the term 'violation of human dignity' for only serious cases of mistreatment or humiliation of people (Fischer, Gruden, Imhof & Strub, 2007). Nico Koopman also has grave reservations, because a concept of human dignity that is based on autonomy does not seem to ensure the effective recognition of the human dignity of severely handicapped, especially severely mentally handicapped people. He agrees with Hans Reinders, Stanley Hauerwas and Alisdair MacIntyre that we should rather take as a point of departure, an anthropology that does not see human beings in the first instance as isolated and independent, autonomous individuals, but rather as vulnerable social beings who are, to a large extent, dependent on their fellow-human beings (Koopman, 2007).

I am also of the opinion that we as Christians should be wary of an understanding of human dignity merely in terms of autonomy, because it does not adequately safeguard the effective recognition of the dignity of embryos, fetuses, newborn babies and severely mentally handicapped and demented persons. However, we should be careful not to overstate our case against the concept of human dignity based on autonomy. In criticising such a concept Nico Koopman comes to the conclusion: "Human dignity does not reside in self-determination but precisely in the opposite, in determination by the other" (Koopman, 2007, p. 183). From what Koopman writes immediately after this assertion one can conclude that he wishes to emphasise that our dependence on others does not entail the denial of our human dignity. People have human dignity while being dependent on one another. However, this is something different from what he is asserting in the sentence I have quoted, namely that human dignity *resides* in determination. To say that is to assert that human dignity consists in the opposite of autonomy, in being determined by others, or to put it in Kantian terms: in heteronomy.

The first problem that I have with such an assertion is that it does not distinguish clearly enough between good and bad ways of being dependent on or being determined by others. Being tortured, being a slave of other people, being politically oppressed or being economically exploited are all examples of bad dependence on or determination by others. To consider human dignity to reside or consist in determination by the other, without any further qualification, is to accept a concept of human dignity that does not provide adequate protection to tortured, oppressed and exploited people, among others. Added to that, a concept of human dignity that equates human dignity with determination by the other would hardly provide adequate motivation for working for the empowerment of people in order to enable them to take greater control of their own lives. That brings me to the second

problem I have with such a concept of human dignity: it does not give enough credit to an important element of truth in Kant's portrayal of human dignity. Although human dignity does not *consist* in being autonomous, human dignity does imply a calling to take responsibility for one's own life and especially for taking responsibility for living a moral life. This is a point that is also made by Frits de Lange with reference to Søren Kierkegaard's Christian concept of vocation. "People's dignity does not rest in their rationality (Kant) nor on their social merits, but on the fact that they are called by God to live their lives as his creatures *coram Deo*, together with others. Their self-respect is implied by and derived from this vocation" (De Lange, 2007:223). The implication is that the *recognition* and *enhancement* of human dignity entails both the responsibility not to disrupt a fellow human being's effort to exercise her own responsibility to take control of her life and to live a moral life in accordance with her own convictions, and the responsibility to encourage and enable her to exercise this responsibility. Linked to this recognition and enhancement of human dignity is a teleological element. The goal is, among others, the protection and enablement of the responsibility of fellow human beings to live a life in accordance with their own life plans.

I believe that this emphasis on vocation and responsibility is an essential part of the concept of human dignity and is also supported by the other main answer to the question: "On account of what do all human beings share a special dignity?" In Christian circles, the answer to this question has for the most part been that humans share a special dignity on account of their being created in the image of God. As a result of the influence of Greek philosophy, the image of God has often been understood as referring to the fact that human beings possess reason. If being created in the image of God is interpreted in such a way, understanding human dignity in terms of it does not differ much from the first answer. In Protestant circles, being created in the image of God has tended to be understood in relational terms. A relational interpretation seems to be more in line with the exegesis of the passage in Genesis (Gen 1:26-27) that is the *locus classicus* for the doctrine that human beings are created in the image of God. Klaas Spronk comes to the conclusion that the exegesis of this passage necessitates the conclusion that "the qualification of human beings as image of God does not in the first place say something about humans as such but first and foremost about the interaction between them and God, the Creator and his creation" (Spronk, 2007:198). To put it another way: the image of God should not be seen as referring to a particular or distinctive *feature* of human beings, but rather to the special *relationship* in which they are placed by God the Creator. It is on account of this special relationship that they can be said to have dignity. Dignity is bestowed on human beings by God by the initiative he took in creating a special relationship with them that differs from his relationship with any other creature. He created them as beings with whom He wanted to have a loving, personal relationship and to whom He entrusted certain important tasks. By doing that He puts them in an exceptional position over and against other creatures. He entrusts them with the mandate to be stewards of his creation, to be responsible for the development, protection and enhancement of the earth and of all the creatures on earth (cf. Fischer *et al*, 2007). The calling or responsibility to respond to God and to look after his creation in an appropriate way is thus implied by human dignity on account of being created in the image of God. On account of the fact that our vocation with regard to creation involves three basic relationships: the relationship to our selves, to other human beings and to nature, I fully agree with the following assertion of Evert Jonker: "In dignity we experience a moral vocation to our selves, to others and to nature" (Jonker, 2007:230).

Huber and Körtner are both of the opinion that human dignity should in the first instance be understood in terms of the doctrine of justification of the Reformation (Huber, 1996; Körtner, 1999). In this doctrine of justification, the insight is formulated that a human being, as a person, is not constituted by her own achievements, but solely by her relationship to God, initiated by Him in justifying her as a sinner, without her in any way contributing to it or having any disposal over it. Therefore, her human dignity should also not be understood as something that can be found in her as a human being, but as something that is bestowed on her by God in his justifying grace. This understanding of human dignity is criticised by the Roman Catholic theologian Werner Wolbert: "...if dignity is bestowed on humans only by virtue of their justification, we are faced with a substantial problem: Sinners and the justified would be unequal with regard to their dignity and perhaps so too the baptised and non-baptised. We should remind ourselves in this context that Islam traditionally assumes a similar kind of inequality between Muslims and non-Muslims" (Wolbert, 2007:173). Wolbert is of course right that any attempt to reserve human dignity for only Christian believers or baptised members of the church would be highly problematic and in total contradiction to the modern understanding of human dignity. However, to reserve human dignity for only believers and the baptised is not the intention and also not the implication of the understanding of human dignity in terms of God's justification. As Huber points out, the dignity of the justified sinner is not found in herself – for example, in the fact that she believes or is baptised – but externally in the gift of God's justifying grace for all sinners (Huber, 1996).

The discussion of the concept of human dignity so far has already shown that it is a complex concept with different dimensions that all have to be taken into account if one wants to do justice to it. There is, first of all, an *ontological* dimension that entails that all human beings have human dignity, because it is bestowed on them as a gift in the act of God's creation and the justification of human beings. Secondly, there is an *experiential* dimension in that the human dignity that God has bestowed on every human being only becomes an experienced reality for an individual when it is internalised in a positive attitude of self-respect. Thirdly, there is a *normative* dimension in that human dignity holds normative implications for both the carrier of human dignity and for those who interact with him or her. Human dignity entails that the carrier has the responsibility to act in a dignified way, by fulfilling God's moral vocation with respect to him/herself, fellow human beings and nature. Other human beings, but also institutions such as the state, in turn have the responsibility to respect the human dignity of the carrier, both in withholding themselves from humiliating treatment and in enhancing the wellbeing of the carrier. In summary, one can say that the concept of human dignity entails that the *reality* of human dignity bestowed on human beings by God has to be *actualised* in self-respect, responsible moral behaviour and respectful treatment by others.

From the perspective of a Christian ethics of responsibility, it is important to not only emphasise the recognition and enhancement of the human dignity of human beings living today. It is also important to emphasise the need to recognise and enhance the human dignity of future generations in what we are doing today and not to emphasise the recognition and the enhancement of human dignity at the cost of the rest of God's creatures. As a result of widespread recognition that the negative consequences of modern technology pose a serious threat to the quality of life and even the survival of future generations, there is also increasing recognition of our present responsibility to recognise and enhance the human dignity of future generations. Whether we also have to recognise and enhance the dignity of nature in the light of the threat of modern technology is an issue on which no

consensus has been reached. Huber points out that the Enlightenment concept of human dignity, in terms of autonomy, reflects a very strong anthropocentric bias. According to him, it implies that not only do human beings have a higher dignity than other creatures, but that *only* human beings have dignity (Huber, 1996). In his opinion that is not an implication of the relational Christian understanding of human dignity. It makes allowance for accepting that nature does have a certain dignity that should be respected by human beings.<sup>3</sup> However, he is critical of the view of some influential representatives of the environmental movement that say that animals have rights in the same way that human beings have rights, because it is not clear which entities in nature should be regarded as carriers of rights and how nature could stand up for its own rights (Huber, 1996).

### **Taking Responsibility for the Recognition and Effective Enhancement of Human Dignity in Africa**

As indicated in the introduction, I would like to address in the second part of this paper the question, “What does taking responsibility for the recognition and effective enhancement of human rights in Africa entail?” from the perspective of a Christian ethics of responsibility. This is not the time and the place to provide a full discussion of different versions of a Christian ethics of responsibility and an explanation of my own views on such an ethics (cf. De Villiers, 2005, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). Suffice it to say, it was the sociologist Max Weber who coined the term ‘ethics of responsibility’ to distinguish a new approach to ethics he propagated from the ‘ethics of conviction’ that he found prevalent among Christian pacifist and socialist politicians of his time and which he found lacking (Weber, 1994). The term ‘ethics of responsibility’ is also applicable to the Christian ethical approaches of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Bonhoeffer, 1998) and H Richard Niebuhr (Niebuhr, 1978). After the publication of the philosopher Hans Jonas’s book *Das Prinzip Verantwortung* in 1979 (the American version being *The imperative of responsibility*, published in 1984) the German theologians Wolfgang Huber, Johannes Fischer and Ulrich Körtner and the American theologian William Schweiker wrote extensively on the ethics of responsibility (cf. Huber, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993 and 1996; Fischer, 1992, 1994, 1998, 2002; Fisher et al., 2007; Körtner, 1996; 1997a, 1997b, 1999 and 2001; Schweiker, 1993, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2000 and 2004). Huber, Körtner and Schweiker also developed their own versions of a Christian ethics of responsibility.

In my own opinion, a Christian ethics of responsibility that is developed in critical dialogue with Max Weber’s original version of an ethics of responsibility has the most promising prospects. My suggestion is that such a Christian ethics of responsibility should be based on the following principles:

- i) Christians themselves ought to take responsibility for identifying and fulfilling their moral vocation in the world;

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<sup>3</sup> Johannes Fischer is of the opinion that the term ‘dignity’ should rather not be used with regard to animals and plants: “Ein Wort, das im Bereich des menschlichen eine klar umrissene Bedeutung hat, wird solchermassen in den ausserhumanen Bereich eingeführt, indem man ihm eine neue, völlig andere Bedeutung unterlegt. Von dieser Art ist die Gleichsetzung von ‘Würde’ mit ‘inhärentem Wert’, wie sie in dem erwähnten Gutachten vorgenommen wird. In der Naturethik bezeichnet man etwas als inhärent wertvoll, wenn es um seiner selbst willen moralische Berücksichtigung verdient und nicht nur um des Wertes oder Nutzens willen, den es für uns Menschen hat. Evident ist ein solch inhärenter Wert etwas andere als Würde...Die Übertragung des ‘Würde’ auf die aussermenschliche Natur führt ... nur zu begrifflichen Konfusionen” (Fischer *et al.*, 2007:360).

- ii) They have the responsibility to ensure that their ethical decisions and actions are corresponding to concrete reality;
- iii) They have the responsibility to ensure that the priority of moral values is also maintained in the differentiated and independent spheres of society;
- iv) They have the responsibility to take into account the foreseeable consequences of different options for action in their ethical discernment, before deciding on a particular course of action.

I will now briefly draw out some implications for these principles for the recognition and effective enhancement of human dignity in Africa.

- i) *Christians ought to take responsibility themselves for identifying and fulfilling their moral vocation in this world.*

A Christian ethics of responsibility should, in my opinion, emphasise that the moral dimension of life does not so much consist in obeying moral duties and commands, but rather in taking the responsibility to identify one's own moral calling by God and to fulfill this calling in a creative and concrete way. This is also true with regard to the responsibility Christians have for the recognition and effective enhancement of human dignity in Africa. It is not enough to acknowledge in an abstract way that we have a duty with regard to the recognition of human dignity. We have to develop an acute awareness of and sensitivity for concrete occurrences of the violation and non-recognition of human dignity in our own context. The cases that need the most urgent attention and God's concrete calling to us to alleviate the plight of specific individuals or groups of people should be identified. This should be followed by taking concrete steps to effectively counter the violation and non-recognition of human dignity in these urgent cases.

In the African context we are confronted with so many examples of the violation and non-recognition of human dignity and the challenges put to us often seem overwhelming. We therefore tend to shut ourselves off from people who are affected with the excuse that there is nothing effective that we as individuals can do for them. The only way for us as Christians to overcome this widespread feeling of powerlessness is to take into account that although it may be true that in many such cases there is very little that we as individuals can do, there is much more that we can do if we work together in the church and in organisations specifically geared to help affected people or to protest against discrimination, exploitation and oppression. Like so many other serious problems in this world the problem of the violation and non-recognition of human dignity can only be overcome by exercising co-responsibility in institutions.<sup>4</sup> We do not only have a co-responsibility to effectively work together in institutions in this regard, but to also establish the necessary institutions to address different aspects of the problem.

In Africa, there is often an unwillingness to assume personal responsibility for violations of human dignity, whether one has been directly or indirectly involved with such vio-

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the following remark of Christoph Hubig regarding the fulfillment of personal responsibility in technologically sophisticated societies: "Das Tätigkeitsfeld des Einzelnen wird im komplexen arbeitsteiligen Prozess zwischen Innovation, Produktion, Distribution und Konsumtion immer enger. Zur Übernahme von Verantwortung bedarf er der wissensmässigen Unterstützung über Voraussetzungen und Wirkungen der Gesamtstrategie, in die sein Handeln eingebunden ist. Woher sollte er dies bekommen, wenn nicht durch entsprechende Institutionen? Weiterhin bedarf er zum Wirksamwerden seiner Verantwortungsübernahme der Unterstützung durch Instanzen die verhindern, dass sein individuelles Handeln folgenlos bleibt, weil er entweder ersetzt oder sein Handeln durch anderer individuelles Handeln kompensiert wird. Wer, ausser geeigneten Institutionen, sollte dies leisten können?" (Hubig, 1995:106-107).

lations. In South Africa, some whites, for example, are unwilling to take responsibility for the negative consequences apartheid has had for many black people, although they voted for the National Party and did not in any way protest against the discriminatory policies of the government. Others excuse themselves by pointing out that they were too young to vote during the time of apartheid. Therefore, both these groups also do not feel any responsibility to ask for forgiveness for the racial discrimination of the past or to rectify some of the negative consequences it has had for black people. In fact, on account of measures that the present government has taken to rectify the injustices of the past, such as affirmative action and land reform, many white people are convinced that they are now the victims of discrimination. They are of the opinion that the present government, rather than they themselves, has the responsibility to make amends for past discriminatory measures. From the perspective of a Christian ethics of responsibility, such an attitude is highly problematical. People should be willing to ask for forgiveness if they were in any way – directly or indirectly – involved in violating or not recognising the human dignity of other people. They should not try to hide their own guilt behind the alleged discrimination of others against them.

What is the moral responsibility regarding the negative legacy of apartheid of white people who did not in any way support apartheid, either because they opposed it at the time, or because they were too young to support it? From the perspective of a Christian ethics of responsibility, it would be wrong for them to shirk off any responsibility to do something about it. To be a responsible Christian, according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, means that one should be willing to take vicarious representative action. In Bonhoeffer's *Ethics*, this doctrine of vicarious representative action (German: 'Stellvertretung') refers, first of all, to the free initiative and responsibility for humanity that God takes in Jesus Christ; in God's becoming human, in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through these actions God reconciles and re-creates humanity. The human ethical analogy is acting responsibly on behalf of others and equally on behalf of communities to which we belong. Vicarious representative action means, among other things, to enter into the guilt of others, to be burdened with their guilt. "In vicariously taking responsibility for human beings and in his love for the real human being, Jesus becomes burdened with guilt; indeed he becomes the one upon whom ultimately all human guilt falls" (Bonhoeffer, 2005:233-234). In an analogous way, responsible Christians, out of selfless love for their human brother or sister, cannot and may not withdraw from the community of human guilt. Bonhoeffer does not mean that responsible Christians should in a psychologically sick way experience the guilt of others as their own, and have feelings of guilt on their behalf. What he means is that they will, out of love for both those who have wronged and those who have been wronged, do whatever is necessary to rectify the wrongs of the past and bring about reconciliation between the individuals or the groups of people involved.

There is something else that also has to be highlighted here. We have already alluded to the fact that the recognition and enhancement of human dignity also includes allowing and empowering those who have been helped, to take responsibility for their own lives. This involves consulting them about their own needs and wishes before any effort is made to help them. Not taking their wishes and opinions seriously and pushing one's own opinion of 'what is best for them' is to ignore their human dignity. Unfortunately, this is something that has happened time and again in the provision of development aid by Western governments and NGO's in Africa. The irony is that African people are often not empowered by these projects to enable them to take responsibility for their own lives, and thus they lose the opportunity to enhance their human dignity.

ii) *Christians have the responsibility ensure that their decisions and actions are ethical and corresponding to a concrete reality.*

This responsibility entails in the first instance that we as Christians identify our own particular calling with regard to the recognition and enhancement of human dignity. We should take into account the needs and sufferings of people who are affected before we decide on a particular plan of action. It implies that action should only be taken after a thorough analysis of both the symptoms and causes of the violation and non-recognition of human dignity in a particular situation. The failure of so many development and humanitarian projects in Africa, implemented by Western governments and NGO's, can be partly blamed on the fact that their understanding of the situation was often insufficient. Western governments and NGO's often have strong preconceived notions based on their own political and economic interests and pet theories regarding development and humanitarian aid.<sup>5</sup> The only way to avoid such failures is to consult with those people whose dignity is affected.

It cannot be denied that Western people often tend to be more sensitive to violations of human dignity that involve the violation of the so-called first generation of human rights, namely rights that protect the freedom of the individual. As a result of the strong influence of political liberalism in the Western world, priority is for the most part given to the rights protecting individual freedom. Such human rights have a deterring function against actions and policies of, for example, governments that restrict or invade the freedom space of the individual. This priority of freedom rights is reflected in the constitutions of many Western states, but also in John Rawls's influential two principles of justice. The first principle, which according to Rawls has absolute priority, reads as follows: "each person is to have an equal right to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others" (Rawls, 1971:60).

As a result, Western people tend to be particularly upset when they learn about human rights violations in African countries such as genocide, murder, torture, violent assault, rape, the imprisonment of political opponents, the abolition of political parties, the prohibition of political meetings and the restriction of the freedom of speech of *inter alia* the media. They also tend to respond strongly to these violations of freedom rights and take strong actions against them. For the most part such strong responses and counter-measures have to be commended. All of these violations of freedom rights are also serious violations of human dignity and should therefore be condemned and countered as strongly as possible.

However, the question needs to be asked whether this sensitivity and support for freedom rights should not, in the case of Africa, be met with the same sensitivity and support for the so-called second generation human rights, namely economic, social and cultural rights. The economist Amartya Sen has rightly pointed out that people will only improve the quality of their lives if they have the capabilities or – as he also calls it – "the substantive freedom to do so" (Sen, 1999:283-290). To put it another way: substantive freedom is a prerequisite for personal responsibility. People will and can only take responsibility for their lives if they have the necessary capabilities. Substantive freedom

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<sup>5</sup> The well-known economist John Kenneth Galbraith argues extensively in his book: *The nature of mass poverty*, that much of the development and humanitarian aid provided by the Western world to developing countries after the Second World War was not based on true insight into the needs of the poor. It was mostly driven by the motives, insights, preferences and experiences of those who provided the aid. He writes: "The causes of this mass rural poverty, in contrast with case poverty, have been much less investigated. Instead, to an astonishing degree, the causes are simply assumed. When examined, these answers have one thing in common: they are universally unsatisfactory... they are selected not for their validity but for their convenience" (Galbraith, 1979:2).

includes having enough personal and political maneuvering space to pursue personal goals successfully. However, the recognition of freedom rights in society is no guarantee that people will be able to live responsible lives. They could hardly do so if they are starving, malnourished, illiterate, and sick, with a disintegrating family life, no formal education, no adequate housing and having a poor self-image, no self-confidence and no self-respect. Therefore, substantive freedom also includes having adequate nourishment, a stable family life, decent formal education, housing and good health and enough self-confidence and self-respect. Having these capabilities depends to a large extent on the recognition of economic, social and cultural rights in a particular society. The effective recognition of these rights should therefore be just as much a priority, in the case of African societies, as the effective recognition of freedom rights.

Of course, this priority should first of all be recognised by the governments of African states. They have the responsibility not to spend the scarce resources of their countries on unnecessary, expensive projects that do not benefit their citizens, especially the poor among them, but to rather utilise such resources in the promotion of their economic, social and cultural rights. By doing this they will help the poor and marginalised in their countries to gain the necessary capabilities to take control of their own lives, that is, to live a dignified life. However, recognising and promoting economic, social and cultural rights in the African context need to be prioritised, especially by the World Bank, the IMF and Western governments. They should withstand the temptation in the present global economic recession, to reduce the amount of money allocated in their budgets for aid projects on behalf of poor, sick and uneducated African people. Giving in to such a temptation would only lead to an even greater catastrophe with regard to the violation and non-recognition of human dignity in Africa.

iii) *Christians have the responsibility to see to it that the priority of moral values is also maintained in the differentiated and independent spheres of society*

I am of the opinion that Max Weber was right in emphasising over and against the proponents of an ethics of conviction that moral principles cannot *replace* legitimate political and economic principles. Social spheres like politics and the economy only function well when they are run in accordance with certain proven, functional principles attuned to the specific nature of the social spheres. However, I am also of the opinion that Weber was wrong in not giving moral principles *priority* in politics and the economy, but leaving the decision on which principles should have priority to political and economic leaders (Weber, 1994).

We have had over the last few decades some extreme examples of African dictators who chose to leave moral principles completely out of politics, reducing their political rule to a brutal power struggle, in which political opponents were cruelly persecuted and oppressed. The attempt by African political leaders to elevate the right to political self-determination to the status of a human right has to be met with skepticism, because it smacks too much of an attempt to insulate themselves from any criticism from the international community. In response, Christians should uphold the view that in politics, moral values should always have priority. When that is not happening and human dignity is violated by politicians, they have the responsibility to protest with a prophetic voice.

On the economic terrain, African states and their citizens have for the most part not benefited from economic globalisation over the last few decades. Many African states have been caught in a debt trap after they were granted independence, and were submitted to the strict structural adaptation programmes (SAPs) of especially the IMF. As a result of the

economically dogmatic way in which the SAP's were applied, economic development in these countries was stifled and many of their inhabitants experienced severe hardship.

African countries that have not met the necessary conditions (e.g. having the suitable infrastructure and providing appropriate education) have not really benefitted from economic globalisation. In fact, quite a few of these countries and many of their inhabitants are now economically worse off than a few decades ago (cf. De Villiers, 2001; Stiglitz, 2002:5-6, 75-76; Van Drimmelen, 1998:7-28). Although not all the churches in Africa have adequately responded to this negative result of economic globalisation, it must be said that African churches were in the forefront of the initiatives of the WCC and the WARC to condemn globalisation theologically and ethically. The pivotal question remains: is only prophetically condemning economic globalisation the responsible way for churches to go, or should they also give positive moral guidance on the direction that the global economic system ought to develop (cf. Bedford-Strohm, 2007)?

What should the main moral values be that guide the approach of a Christian ethics of responsibility to political and economic policies and actions? None of the traditional Christian moral values should be excluded when it comes to the ethical evaluation of such systems and policies and the formulation of ethical guidelines on what ought to be done by Christians. However, in my opinion two moral values – interpreted from a Christian perspective – stand out when it comes to the approach of a Christian ethics of responsibility to economic systems and policies, namely *justice*, interpreted as preferential option for the poor, and *care*.

The one legacy of liberation theology that is today accepted by most theologians is its interpretation of the biblical concept of justice, in terms of a preferential option for the poor and the weak. According to this interpretation the biblical concept of justice entails that preference should be given to the fulfillment of the basic needs of desperately poor people. As Huber points out, such partiality for the poor and the weak is in tension with the strict impartiality of human rights catalogues that do not allow the favouring of any group of people, whether they are marginalised or privileged. That is one of the reasons why the right of asylum of refugees has never been acknowledged in international human rights catalogues (Huber, 1996:255). This is where churches and their members should exceed the human rights approach by putting pressure on governments and international economic organisations to give priority to the fulfillment of the basic needs of all of those – especially in Africa – who are suffering as a result of absolute poverty, political oppression, economic exploitation or sickness.

Churches and their members also have a responsibility to care for the poor and the weak themselves. Such care will include humanitarian aid in the form of the provision of food, medical care, education and housing. In many cases, the bodily and/or psychological scars left as a result of the violation of human dignity in Africa is of such a serious nature that a much more intense and personal form of care is needed. The self-respect of people who have undergone abandonment, discrimination, sexual abuse, torture and humiliation over a long period is sometimes so bruised, that it can only be healed by prolonged and loving care. Total acceptance, by at least a few close people, remains a condition for the recovery of self-respect in many serious cases of the violation of human dignity.

iv) *Christians have the responsibility to take into account the foreseeable consequences of different options for action in their ethical discernment before deciding on a particular course of action.*

Max Weber already pointed out that the politician who departs from an ethics of responsibility always takes into account the foreseeable consequences of different options for

action, before taking a final decision. He criticised the Christian pacifist politicians of his time for departing from an ethics of conviction by applying their religiously inspired moral convictions in an abstract and absolute way to politics, without taking into account the consequences of their decisions. In fact, according to Weber, they were happy to leave the responsibility for the outcome of their decisions to the almighty God who in his providence determines the outcome of events in accordance with his will (Weber, 1994:77-87). Hans Jonas in turn emphasised the urgent need to anticipate possible new responsibilities with regard to the application of modern technology. As a result of the potential destructive and disruptive nature of modern technology, careful consideration of the future risks involved in applying particular scientific techniques should first be determined before a decision on its application is taken (Jonas, 1984:5-11). However, the same is true when it comes to decisions on the implementation of development and other humanitarian aid projects intended to enhance the human dignity of the poor, sick or oppressed people of Africa. There are numerous examples of such projects that failed, because the potential negative consequences of their implementation were not taken into account beforehand.

Attie van Niekerk relates a typical story of an irrigation scheme that was introduced by a German and Norwegian-based development organisation on behalf of the nomadic Turkana tribe in northern Kenya. The money earned by working on the erection of the irrigation scheme was used by the Turkana to buy more goats, which traditionally represented their wealth. As a result, they abandoned their nomadic lifestyle and started to live permanently in towns, and their growing flocks hopelessly overgrazed the environment. Thousands of trees were also cut down for kraals for the goats. The cultivated lands did not produce as much food as was planned, because of the lack of experience of the Turkana in working the land. They had to be kept alive more often than before by means of feeding schemes. In addition, malaria mosquitoes and bilharzia started breeding in the new dams – a problem they had not experienced before. The result was that after twenty years of development, the Turkana were worse off than they had been when they were nomads. They were poorer, sicker, more undernourished, more vulnerable and more dependent than before (Van Niekerk, 1996:76-77).

It is true that in the case of many failed development projects in the past, the negative consequences could, for the most part, not be foreseen. However, we now have quite a few decades of experience of development and humanitarian aid projects behind us. It is possible to draw some general conclusions on the consequences of development projects, like the following one drawn by Berma Klein Goldewijk and Bas de Gaay Fortman: “Development by modernizing the economy often results in violation of economic, social and cultural rights because it negatively affects traditional arrangements of entitlement. Where the legal basis of access to resources changes from traditional institutions – through rite or clan, for example – to property or other types of private title, the more vulnerable members of the community are likely to be marginalized” (Klein Goldewijk & De Gaay Fortman, 1999:23). Once the potential negative consequences of development and humanitarian aid projects in developing countries can be foreseen and the dynamics that lead to these negative consequences is understood, it is possible to avoid at least some of the risks involved in such projects, by meticulous planning and widespread consultation.

## **Conclusion**

A case was made in this article that a Christian ethics of responsibility would favour the concept of human dignity and that it would imply a calling to take responsibility for one’s own life, especially from a moral perspective. In the African context, taking responsibility

for the recognition and effective enhancement of human dignity entails, firstly, overcoming the widespread tendency of blaming the violation and non-recognition of human dignity in African on others and finding excuses for not doing something constructive to counter it. Second, it entails that those in the Western world, who are involved in development and humanitarian aid projects in Africa, should not base their involvement on preconceived notions, informed by their own political and economic interests and pet theories. However, such projects need to consider the real needs of African people and how to prevent their human dignity being violated or not recognised. Third, it entails working against the widespread tendency to misuse the so-called autonomy of the political and economic spheres to further selfish personal or group interests in Africa. It entails taking responsibility for the recognition, also in politics and business, of the priority of moral values such as justice and care. Lastly, it entails taking the lessons learned from many failed development and humanitarian aid projects in Africa to heart, and taking into account the foreseeable consequences of different approaches before deciding on a particular course of action.

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