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SOME THEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON HUMAN DIGNITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS[1]

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Abstract

This article acknowledges that human dignity is a concept that cannot be not easily defined. It attempts to acquire a cognitive grip on dignity by defining it in terms of the needs and anxieties of human beings and in terms of narratives of the violation of dignity. The foundations of human dignity in Trinitarian faith are then discussed and specifically the implications and value of Helmut Thielicke's concept of alien dignity is briefly evaluated. It is argued that alien dignity does have the potential to enrich contemporary dignity discourses. The argument that the notion of alien dignity protects and enhances the dignity of the most vulnerable in society is specifically acknowledged and cherished in contemporary discourses on a theological anthropology of vulnerability. Finally, the article proposes that human rights are a crucial means by which to protect the dignity of the most vulnerable members of society and to enhance respect for dignity.

Key words: Alien dignity, Anthropology, Human rights, H Thielicke, Trinitarian faith

1. Introduction

This paper argues that a theological anthropology of vulnerability and dependency provides a strong theological rationale for human dignity. The argument is unpacked by means of the following structure:

1) The quest for the restoration of dignity during and after apartheid in South Africa is briefly outlined.
2) This outline helps to shed some light on the features of a dignified life.
3) Next the theological roots and features of an anthropology of vulnerability, as opposed to an anthropology of autonomy and power, are briefly outlined.
4) Finally, it is argued that the notion of human rights becomes increasingly important against the background of an anthropology of vulnerability.

2. The Quest for the Restoration of Dignity in South Africa

The struggle against apartheid in South Africa was one for the restoration of human dignity. For millions of anti-apartheid campaigners overcoming apartheid implied helping South Africans once more to believe that all human beings do possess dignity, that to be human is to have dignity, that *humanitas* and *dignitas* are synonyms, that to be human is to be fully child of God. Apartheid endeavoured to distort this picture. It dehumanised white people by teaching them that they were superior, and it dehumanized black people by teaching them

[1] This article is a revised version of a paper presented at a consultation on "Human Dignity – an Article of Faith? Practices and Perspectives" of the Protestant Theological University Kampen and Stellenbosch University's Faculty of Theology, on 10-11 October 2005 in Kampen, The Netherlands.

that they were inferior to Whites. Part of the rehumanisation process entails that Whites be freed from superiority and Blacks from inferiority complexes.

Anti-apartheid champion Steve Bantu Biko also described the anti-apartheid struggle as a quest for rehumanisation. He appealed to churches to participate in the struggle to give South Africa a more human face. According to Biko, participation in this struggle was one of the greatest gifts churches could bestow on their society.[2]

Even though the notion of human dignity quite often is used in academic and popular discourses in almost all walks of life, it cannot easily be defined. Francis Fukuyama states that it is one of those concepts that politicians and virtually everyone else in public life throw around, but that almost no one can either define or explain.[3] It might be helpful to argue that dignity is violated where the basic needs of humans are not met. Psychologist Abraham Maslow identifies three sets of human needs. These are primary needs (i.e. need for water, food, clothes, shelter, protection, medical care, education etc.), secondary needs (i.e. the need to have social relations, to be included in social, economic, political and cultural life etc.) and tertiary needs (i.e the need to develop and actualize potentials like the artistic, aesthetical, cultural, intellectual etc.).[4] Theologian Paul Tillich's description of a life of anxiety might also be a way of describing a life in which dignity is not flourishing. He identifies three types of anxieties, namely the anxiety of finitude and death, of meaninglessness and purposelessness and of guilt and rejection.[5]

The description of stalwart of the anti-apartheid struggle, Archbishop Denis Hurley[6], demonstrates how the dignity of millions of South Africans was violated under apartheid and outlines different dimensions of the distortion of human dignity in apartheid South Africa. In his discussion we see reflected the various unfulfilled needs as well as the various anxieties that are referred to in the foregoing paragraphs.

The first dimension of the distortion of dignity that Hurley refers to is the westernization and modernization processes of the previous century that broke down indigenous institutions and made age-old customs African customs irrelevant. For African people this violent transition was a shattering experience in which they saw the framework of lives disintegrating around them and through which they lost contact with the reliable things that give their lives anchorage and meaning. The narrative style in which Hurley describes the violation of the dignity of husbands, wives and young people in apartheid South Africa does not shed light on the violation of dignity during the apartheid years only, but it also has the potential to assist us in acquiring a cognitive grip on the notion of human dignity in post-apartheid South Africa today. Hurley's the touching narratives of a father who must leave his family to become a migrant labourer, of a mother who experiences anxiety about the well-being of her husband and children in a so-called homeland with no economic opportunities whatsoever and of a youngster who has no hope and dreams of a better tomorrow perhaps deserve to be quoted extensively:

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2 See S Biko. *Black Consciousness and the quest for a true humanity*, (1968), repr. 2004 as: *Steve Biko. I write what I like.* Stubbs, A (ed.), Johannesburg: Picador Africa, 108.

3 See F Fukuyama 2003. *Our posthuman future. Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution.* London: Profile Books, 148. Professor of human rights, Sandra Liebenberg, likewise reckons that this concept is not easily defineable. See S Liebenberg 2005. "The value of human dignity in interpreting socio-economic rights." In: Van der Walt, A (ed.) *Theories of social and economic justice.* Stellenbosch: Sun Press, 146.

4 See AH Maslow 1954. *Motivation and personality* . New York: Harper and Row.

5 See P Tillich 1952 repr. 1961. *The courage to be.* London: James Nisbet and Company, 37-51.

6 D Hurley 1966. *Human dignity and race relations.* Johannesburg: South African Institute of Race Relations, 11.

> "It is a tragedy to be the father of a family, the head of a household, to be conscious of the dignity associated with your role and the responsibility resting on your shoulders, and not to be able to provide for your wife and children. Life is a sacred trust from your ancestors. In loving collaboration with the wife that has been given to you, you have been perpetuated their line. New life has come. It looks up to you pleading for the food and shelter that is its due. And often you are powerless to provide them. Very often you cannot provide the needs of your family by staying at home. You must leave it and embark on a rootless, homeless existence in some remote city. You must leave behind the consciousness of role and dignity and work as a 'boy' in a gang of other 'boys' for months on end. Not merely for months. For long, long years, with the odd short break at home until, as so often happens, your new surroundings, your new attachments, your city family mean more to you than the ones you left behind you. Who can blame you for not being a better man than the men of any other country whom society condemns to be exiles from their homes?

It is a tragedy to be a mother of a family and to know the hurt to your husband's pride because he cannot provide for you, to know the negation of your maternal role because you must leave your home to work. There is no escaping it. Without your work the family would starve. Day after day you must be gone before day-break and return after nightfall, for the place of work is far from your home in the African township. During all this time you scarcely see you children. You make what arrangements you can for their feeding. Often enough that amounts to one meal in the evening. The children go hungry to school. After school they roam the streets because there is no mother to make home the place it should be. You know what company they mix with in the streets. You know the bad habits they acquire, the coarse speech they develop. Your heart aches to see them growing up without the discipline and courtesy that gave home life its joy and consistency in your own childhood. But what can you do? If you stay at home to educate them, the family starves. You will be exceptionally fortunate if your daughters enter marriage before they have borne children.

It is a tragedy to be a young person growing up, a boy or a girl, with an appetite for knowledge and opportunity that school provides and to find that school is out of the question, because the fees are too high or school accommodation inadequate. It is a tragedy to experience ambition and the desire to choose your own life but to know that it is impossible, that you must accept the first job that comes your way and know that for the rest of your life you will be drifting from one menial job to another with no hope of security, no hope of building your own life, your own career."[7]

Thirteen years into the so-called new South Africa, millions of people still experience this violation of dignity. Although we made very good progress as South African nation during the first decade of democracy, we have a lot of outstanding work to do. Many still do not have their basic needs met and still live in anxiety.

Part of our progress was the adoption of a constitution with a bill of rights. The South African Bill of Rights entrenches human dignity in both its preamble and clauses. Dignity, therefore, does not only constitute the foundation of the Bill of Rights, but it is also to be the guiding principle in all policies and practices in all walks of life in South African society. Based on the commitment to dignity three dimensions of rights are articulated in the Bill of Rights, namely first dimension civil and political, second dimension social and economic, and third dimension developmental and ecological rights. However, much remains to be done regarding the fulfilment of especially second and third dimension rights. Implementation of the various rights takes place in the context of a modern and globalised world.

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[7] Hurley *idem*, 11-13.

Millions of South Africans are marginalised from the goods of the modern world. They live in, what Jürgen Moltmann calls, "submodernity".[8]

Steve Biko's invitation to churches three decades ago to bestow the gift of dignity and humanness on South African society is as relevant and urgent today as it was then.

3. Human Dignity in Trinitarian Perspective

Biko puts a more than appropriate challenge to churches and theology. We are in the human dignity business. We stand in a long tradition which, despite the many failures of its adherents, does not only provide a rationale, meaning-giving-framework, motivation and *telos* for the dignity discourse, but also the formative practices, the equipment and strength, and above all the personal relationship with the Triune God, all of which pave the way towards our embarking on the journey of the restoration of dignity in the world. The inherent dignity, value and worth of human beings that challenges us to create humane living conditions have a Trinitarian basis. We have dignity because we are created in God's image; we have dignity because God became human in Jesus Christ and redeems us; we have dignity because the Holy Spirit, as God at work in the world, is actualising in and through us the new humanity that is a reality in Jesus Christ.

Karen Lebacqz[9] builds on Helmut Thielicke's notion of alien dignity to construct a Trinitarian approach to human dignity. For Thielicke human beings have intrinsic and inherent worth and dignity. However, this dignity does not reside in some inherent characteristic of human nature. In a certain sense one could say that it is not an analytic dignity. It is, to use my own words, a synthetic dignity, or in Thielicke's words, an "alien dignity". It is a dignity that is imputed to us by the love of God for us as expressed in our being created in God's image. Through sin this image was violated but, through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, God remembers us and draws us back into a relationship of love. This relationship of love with God constitutes the image of God. Christ embodies this image perfectly and through his work of redemption we are again image of God, i.e. we are living in a relationship of love with Him and other humans and even with the rest of creation. According to Thielicke,[10] the pneumatological and eschatological dimension of dignity resides in the fact that we do not have ontological, but teleological dignity. This means our dignity resides in the wonderful purposes, the life of quality, for which God has created humans. Human dignity has its roots in the relationship of love between God and humans, as well as with the rest of his creation. According to Lebacqz,[11] for Thielicke alien dignity not only has to do with the vertical relationship with God. Other humans realise our dignity by the acting out of *agape*, out of a perspective of who we are before God.

Lebacqz[12] also mentions the concern that Thielicke's notion of alien dignity might imply that our dignity is not really ours, that *dignitas* is removed too much from the *humanum*, and that it is made precarious. The notion of alien dignity which is imputed by God also suggests that God is not involved in our lives, specifically in our vulnerabilities and suffering. However, Lebacqz is of the opinion that these concerns represent a misreading of Thielicke's views. When the implications of his notion of alien dignity is analysed, the

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8 See J Moltmann 1999. *God for a secular society*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

9 K Lebacqz 1998. "Alien dignity: The legacy of Helmut Thielicke for bioethics. " In: Lammers, SE and A Verhey (eds.), *On moral medicine. Theological perspectives in medical ethics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 184-185.

10 Lebacqz *idem*, 190.

11 Lebacqz *idem*, 190.

12 Lebacqz *idem*, 185-186.

value of his position for contemporary human dignity discourses in the field of bio-ethics as well as for other fields becomes apparent.

In the first place alien dignity lends protection. It is inalienable dignity. It is indelible. It is a mark put on us by the love of God that permeates our being to the core. This dignity does not have to be earned. It cannot be lost. It is intimately mine and it is far more enduring than any of my characteristics. Our youth will surely pass and our beauty will fade in time, but our alien dignity does not. The idea of alien dignity coincides with Kant's view that the notion of dignity implies that human beings can never be treated according to their instrumental value. They can never be means to an end. Their worth is not determined by their technical and utilitarian capacities.[13] At this point it is important to note that not even the most humble, threatening and vulnerable state impacts negatively on our dignity. Because we have alien dignity we can be assured of special protection in the most threatening of situations and conditions. The notion of alien dignity also implies that all people are equal, despite any diversity of role, social status, race, colour, class or sex. Alien dignity encourages us to accept diversity and affirm equality.[14]

According to Lebacqz, Thielicke's concept of alien dignity also implies that we respond on the personal level of love to violations of human dignity, and that individuals and groups in all walks of life, more so church people who adhere to this Trinitarian alien dignity, also participate on the collective, structural level in processes to restore dignity.[15]

4. Human Dignity and a Theological Anthropology of Vulnerability

One of the strengths of the model of Thielicke and Lebacqz is that it especially views the most vulnerable persons as having alien dignity that is inalienable. Scholars who work on a so-called anthropology of vulnerability concur with Lebacqz's views. Theologians like Hans Reinders, Christine Smith and Stanley Hauerwas, and a philosopher like Alasdair MacIntyre help us to understand humanity in terms of vulnerability and dependence.

Reinders states that for the past three decades health care ethics has been dominated by the modern moral ideal of independent existence. Human beings should make decisions with regard to their medical treatment in a rational and autonomous way.[16] The main task of health care is to free patients from dependency and to place them in a position where they can negotiate as clients on an equal basis with the providers of health care about their treatment. Rights are to be acknowledged and laws passed that assure that patients can act with self-determination and autonomy.[17]

Although Reinders admits that patient rights are important to protect handicapped people against abuse, he believes that a health care ethics based on rights and that has a negative view of dependence is not adequate. People with disabilities not only need rights, but

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13 See Lebacqz *idem*, 186. Sandra Liebenberg leans on this Kantian idea that dignity resides in our intrinsic and not in our instrumental worth and value. See Liebenberg idem, 145-146.

14 Lebacqz *idem*, 187-188.

15 Lebacqz *idem*, 188-191. Sandra Liebenberg employs the relational view of human dignity – although not baseing it on Trinitarian thinking – in the development of theories that might enhance the implementation of social and economic rights. She argues that society's failure to redress conditions of socio-economic disadvantage represents a collective failure to value human dignity. Poverty is not a reflection of the moral blameworthiness of groups experiencing poverty but a reflection of how we as society have failed to value dignity. See Liebenberg *idem*, 152.

16 See Hans S Reinders 1996. *Wat niets kan worden, stelt niets voor. Mensen met een ernstige verstandelijke handicap in het licht van de hedendaagse gezondheidsethiek*. Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 2.

17 See Reinders *idem*, 14.

more than that they need involvement, commitment, faithfulness and love.[18] An adequate ethical response to disabled people can only be arrived at if the dependence of human beings is not viewed negatively. This requires a break with the dominant modern anthropology of rationality, autonomy and independence. With an appeal to the ethicist Joan Tronto, Reinders argues that the one fundamental feature of humans should not be independence, but care. Care is the result of the acknowledgement that we can never be fully autonomous, but need each other, that we exist in a condition of interdependence.[19] According to Reinders the idea of human freedom as rational autonomy and independence is an aporia, since human beings are not able to subject all conditions of their existence to reason. These conditions include the contingent and finite nature of our existence, as well as the external limitation of our freedom in relation to others and the internal limitation of our freedom, which is caused by our lack of self-knowledge.[20] Hauerwas[21] shares this plea for the redefinition of human beings in terms of interdependence and care. He is of opinion that the freedom and autonomy, which enable us to decide for ourselves questions such as when to terminate a pregnancy, prevent us from negotiating the limits (i.e. dependence) and possibilities of this existence in a just and caring fashion. The freedom to merely choose for or against contraception prevents us from discussing the question as to why we ought to be open to having and caring for children at all.[22]

Various authors have developed a theological basis for this anthropology of interdependence and care. Reinders' Trinitarian approach, that is described and evaluated in the next paragraph, constitutes an inclusive theological foundation for anthropology of interdependence and care. Reinders pleads for a revaluation of the Trinitarian views of the three third century CE Byzantine church fathers, the so-called Cappadocians, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus. Where Western church fathers like Augustine focused on the being and unity of the Triune God these Eastern theologians concentrated on the diversity and relationships between the three persons. In the last few decades a new appreciation for last-mentioned approach to Trinitarian thinking and the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity developed.[23]

Reinders refers with appreciation to the views on the Trinity of the Greek Orthodox theologian, John Zizioulas who argues that God is not caused by a divine substance but by Himself, specifically by the Father. There is no divine substance which makes God God. His Name, Yahweh, I am what I am, bears witness to this fact.[24] Zizioulas also argues that God has an ecstatic character. *Ecstacis* means that God's being is determined by his radical search for communion with the other. In fact, God *is* communion. In Jesus Christ who became human, we are part of this communion. In this communion God finds his true being.[25] Although I appreciate this position of Reinders I am cautious of drawing consequences from the immanent Trinity. Perhaps we can draw, with a more biblical basis and less risk of speculation, inferences from the economic Trinity for the development of a theological anthropology of relationality, vulnerability and dependency. In fact, the culmination point of

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18 See Reinders *idem*, 15-16.

19 See Reinders *idem*, 16-17.

20 See Reinders *idem*, 32, 61.

21 See S Hauerwas 1986. *Suffering presence, Theological reflections on medicine, the mentally handicapped, and the church.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 13-14.

22 See Hauerwas *idem*, 19.

23 Various prominent authors are pleading for a revaluation of the doctrine of the social trinity, amongst others Moltmann, Van Ruler, Berkhof, Gunton, Welker and Peters.

24 See Reinders *idem*, 30-31, 60-61.

25 See Reinders *idem*, 33.

God's revelation in the crucified and risen Christ provides a solid rationale for an anthropology of vulnerability and relationality. Reinders indeed acknowledges the central role of Christ for a relational understanding of God and humans.

Reinders agrees with Kant that we cannot derive specific moral rules from the Trinity. However he reckons that the Trinity does offer a normative framework for understanding our identity and purpose as human beings.[26] This self-understanding helps us to understand who the disabled person is and this knowledge of who we are and who the disabled are determines the way in which we fulfil our ethical responsibility with regard to disabled people.[27]

True humanity is not defined by independence and rationality, but by the willingness to enter into relationships with others. In this relationship with the other one does not discover a replica of oneself, as Aristotle taught. In the interaction with others, in the communion, in the relationship, I find my essence and being. I receive my being from the other. We receive our existence from the hands of the other and my existence is meaningful because there are others who want to share their existence with me.[28] Reinders argues that we need hermeneutical skills to appropriately understand the other – especially people with disabilities who are viewed as inferior in terms of the modernistic paradigm. These skills enable us to view the other as one who helps to constitute my essence as person. It resists denying the uniqueness of the other and it resists the modernistic temptation to see our task regarding the disabled as one of determining and developing their potential for rational and independent living as was the case in the pedagogic approach to the disabled during the last decade.[29]

Receive my being, my personhood, from the other implies that I am dependent and vulnerable. Those who live so ecstatically can merely trust that this ecstatic living does not imply loosing myself, but the true finding of myself.[30] Hauerwas' view of God as the God of sacrifice, of weakness and suffering who draws people to him not by coercive power but by sacrificial love comes to mind. This genuine weakness lures us from our pretentious attempt to make our lives meaningful through power and violence. This weakness also entails that we acknowledge that our attempt to eliminate the suffering of sick and disabled people – instead of being present to them, being available for them and personally caring for them – merely demonstrates our quest to affirm our own significance through power.[31] During the 20th century with its astronomic level of suffering various theologians described Gods power in terms of this vulnerability, i.e. Berkhof, Kitamori, Sölle, Moltmann.[32]

Human dignity does not reside in self-determination but precisely in the opposite, in determination by the other. Those who recognise their dependence on others will never view the dependence of others as a sign of inferiority.[33] They will rather recognise the call to

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26 See Reinders *idem*, 37.

27 See Reinders *idem*, 43.

28 See Reinders *idem*, 34-35, 43.

29 See Reinders *idem*, 17, 42-43.

30 See Reinders *idem*, 38-39.

31 See Hauerwas *Suffering presence*, 13 and S Hauerwas, S 1998. "The Christian, society and the weak: A meditation on the care of the retarded." In: Lammers, SE and A Verhey (eds.), *On moral medicine: theological perspectives in medical ethics.* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 592.

32 For a helpful outline in this regard, see Durand, J, *Die Lewende God* 1976. Kaapstad: NG Kerk Uitgewers.

33 See Reinders *idem*, 38. The thought of Reinders on an anthropology of vulnerability and dependency is explained in more detail in his recent publication *The future of the disabled in liberal societies.* (2000) Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

humanity that these people offer.[34] According to Christine Smith this dependence on other, specifically disabled, people, opens the door for a theology of receiving. This requires a revaluation of the dominant theological position that teaches that it is better to give than to receive. She quotes a disabled woman: "Can the church not bless my receiving as sacramental as much as your giving, i.e. your helping me?"[35] The church will only respond adequately to this challenge if Christians acknowledge their dependence on each other and if this dependence and vulnerability and suffering are not viewed negatively.

Alasdair MacIntyre builds with appreciation on the work of, amongst others, Reinders. He believes that the emphasis on dependence is a highly neglected theme in Western moral philosophy[36] and states that when reference is made to disabled people in the pages of books on moral philosophy, they are portrayed as subjects of benevolence whilst so-called "normal" people are portrayed as continuously rational, healthy and untroubled.[37] MacIntyre argues that there is no human being who does not experience dependence and vulnerability in his or her life.[38] The notion of an anthropology of vulnerability proclaims that dignity does not reside in the human power, strength, performance, autonomy and merit of whatever kind. To be human is to be vulnerable, is to be dependent, is to live by receiving. The human being who has human dignity is a vulnerable, dependent being. The *humanitas* that is synonymous with *dignitas*, is this vulnerable, fragile, dependent *humanitas*.[39]

5. Vulnerable Humans and Human Rights

This vulnerability explains why we need human rights. The vulnerable need to be protected. Dutch theologian, C. P. Van Andel, demonstrates how the legal measures of the *Torah* protect the vulnerable: Part of the harvest should be left for the poor and strangers (Lev. 19:9; 23:22); disabled people are to be honoured (Lev. 19:14); old people should be respected (Lev. 19:32); strangers should be treated with respect (Lev. 19:33) since they are

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34 See Hauerwas, "The Christian, society and the weak", 592.

35 See C Smith 1992. *Preaching as weeping, confession, and resistance: Radical response to radical evil.* Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 36.

36 "From Plato to Moore and since there are usually, with some rare exceptions, only passing references to human vulnerability and affliction and to the connections between them and our dependence on others … Dependence on others is of course often recognized in a general way, usually as something that we need in order to achieve our positive goals. But an acknowledgement of anything like the full extent of that dependence and of the ways it stems from our vulnerability and our afflictions is generally absent" See MacIntyre, A 1999. *Dependent rational animals. Why human beings need the virtues.* London: Duckworth, 3.

37 See MacIntyre, *Dependent rational animals*, 2.

38 He articulates this inclusive understanding of dependence as follows: "This dependence on particular others for protection and sustenance is most obvious in early childhood and in old age. But between these first and last stages our lives are characteristically marked by longer or shorter periods of injury, illness or other disablement and some among us are disabled for their entire lives." A MacIntyre *Dependent rational animals*, 1. This inclusive understanding of disability and dependence leads to the following conclusion about public morality: "… consequently our interest in how the need of the disabled are adequately voiced and met is not a special interest, the interest of one particular group rather than of others, but rather the interest of the whole political society, an interest that is integral to their conception of their common good." *Idem*, 130.

39 I have dealt with the theme of an anthropology of vulnerability in various articles. E.g. "The dis(otherly)abled and public morality. " In: *Scriptura* 2003:1, 72-81. "Trinitarian anthropology, *ubuntu* and human rights. " In: Botman, HR and K Spörre (eds.) 2003. *Building a human rights culture. South African and Swedish perspectives.*Falin: Stralins, 194-206. "Theological anthropology and gender relations." *Scriptura* 2004: 86, 190-200. "Bonhoeffer's anthropology and the anthropology of *ubuntu*." *Nederlandse Theologische Tijdschrift.* Jaargang 2005:3. 195-206. "*Ubuntu* is not enough. In search of an anthropology for peaceful living." In Van Keulen, D and ME Brinkman (eds.), *Christian Faith and Violence I, Studies in Reformed Theology*, Volume 11. Zoetemeer: Meinema, 157-171.

equal in dignity to Israelites (Lev. 24:22; Num. 15:19). According to Van Andel[40] other categories of vulnerable people who are not explicitly mentioned, like the mentally retarded, are also implied in the provisions of the *Thora*.[41] In a sinful world where the most vulnerable are exploited, they need to be protected by legal means, specifically by human rights. Legal measures, like bills of human rights, do not only want to protect the vulnerable, they also aim at ensuring a life, an ethos, i.e. a habitat, where the dignity of all human beings, especially the most vulnerable ones, flourish.[42]

5. Conclusion

A Trinitarian approach to dignity and a related theological anthropology of vulnerability shed some light on human dignity discourses. It teaches that all humans do have dignity. Our dignity is an imputed dignity. It is an alien dignity which comes from God. And, because it comes from God it is inalienable. This alien dignity is expressed in especially the most vulnerable ones in the human family. The notion of alien dignity implies that all humans are equal, that we are to be treated with justice, that we live in freedom. These values are taken up in bills of human rights. These bills pave the way for developing human rights cultures which imply that various processes are embarked upon to implement these rights and to ensure that dignity is respected.

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40 Van Andel, CP 1985. "Menswaardigheid en verstandelijke handicap." In Stolk, J and M Egberts (eds.), *Tussen verlange en werkelijkheid. Opstellen over de waardigheid van mensen met een verstandelijke handicap*. Amsterdam: Boom, 153-166.

41 *Ibid.* 158.

42 Scholar of law and political theory, Robert George, offers a strong defence of the view that laws can help people to "establish and preserve a virtuous character by (1) preventing the (further) selfcorruption which follows from acting out a choice to indulge in immoral conduct; (2) preventing the bad example by which others are induced to emulate such behavior; (3) helping to preserve the moral ecology in which people make their morally self-constituting choices; and (4) educating people about moral right and wrong." See George, R 1993/1995. *Making men moral. Civil liberties and public morality*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.