

## INTRODUCTION

Article 10 of the Bill of Rights of the 1996 South African Constitution states on behalf of all the country's citizens that: "Everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected". What does this claim entail in post-apartheid democratic South Africa? How can this explicit reference to the high moral notion of "human dignity" be of use in the struggle against the realities of poverty, HIV/AIDS, injustice and violence? How can dignity be protected when it so often is grossly violated?

The South African constitution does not stand alone in its explicit reference to human dignity, but remains one of only a few similar declarations on the issue. The Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union of 2004 (article II-61) states that "Human dignity is inviolable. It must be respected and protected." The text draws heavily on the German constitution of 1949, in which one finds almost exactly the same phrase. Human dignity also is explicitly referred to in the constitutions of Greece, Ireland, Italy, Canada, Portugal, Switzerland, Sweden and Spain.

The notion of human dignity is inextricably linked to European history and culture. However discourses on human dignity, albeit not always termed as such, have been continuing in South Africa since the days of the struggles against colonialism and apartheid up to current efforts towards building a human rights culture in the country and the reconstruction of the African continent. The existence of human dignity discourses in both so-called First and Third World contexts invites joint reflection from both perspectives - this becomes even more necessary given the process of building an increasingly globalised world, but one with a human face.

As part of an on-going collaboration between the Faculty of Theology of the University of Stellenbosch and the Theological University Kampen (now: Protestant Theological University) (the Netherlands) a project on Human Dignity was undertaken. Two consultations took place thus far, the first was at Kampen, on October 10 and 11, 2005, and had as its theme "Human Dignity – an Article of Faith?" The second consultation, on the theme of "Human Dignity at the Edges of Life", took place at Stellenbosch on August 14 and 15, 2006. This volume contains a selection of the contributions made at these two events.

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