HUMAN DIGNITY – AN ECUMENICAL UNDERSTANDING?[1]

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Abstract

A history of at least sixty years of ecumenical co-operation in the area of human rights shows continuous attention to the concept of human dignity. However it is not self-evident that this concept furthers ecumenical dialogue as well as dialogue with other religious and philosophical traditions. Connections are shown with the universalism-relativism debate in international law and with different views of the essence of law as such. Finally, the possible specific contribution of Christian theology towards a wider debate on human dignity is explored, and a challenge for Protestant theology is identified.

Key words: Dignity, Ecumenism, Human rights, Inter-religious Dialogue, Law

Human dignity is a basic concept in the human rights debate. This is evident from the perspective of the ecumenical contribution to this debate. The importance of the concept of human dignity is already clear from the first words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)*.* Its Preamble gives seven reasons why the General Assembly of the United Nations' proclaimed of it. The first and the fifth respectively refer to human dignity:

(1) 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, (...)

(5) Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom, (...).

Now, Therefore the General Assembly proclaims this *Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*

The 1910 International Missionary Conference in Edinburgh already addressed the issue of religious freedom, as did subsequent international assemblies of the early ecumenical movement, including the World Conference on Life and Work in Oxford (1937). Repre-sentatives of the ecumenical community have been involved in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (San Francisco, 1945), especially with regard to its 18th Article, the one on religious freedom. Dr O Fredrick Nolde, who represented the ecume-nical fellowship at that occasion, became director of the new Commission of the Churches on International Affairs (CCIA), which was to be part of the World Council of Churches (WCC). In this capacity he also was instrumental in promoting the adoption of the Universal Declaration. The founding assembly of the WCC (Amsterdam, 1948) suggested

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the basic contents of an article on religious freedom, and Nolde successfully brought it to the meeting where the Universal Declaration's final text was being prepared for adoption (Paris, 1948).[2]

Nolde represented mainly Protestant traditions since most churches from the Orthodox tradition then were not yet members of the WCC and only joined it in 1961. To this day, the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) has never been a WCC member church. Nevertheless, the RCC played its (ecumenical) role in this process as well. Among others, the papal nuncio in Paris Mgr. Giuseppe Roncalli participated in the deliberations of the French delegation and assisted the French jurist René Samuel Cassin in drawing up the first draft of the declaration. So, it seems as if at least the concerted efforts of both the early WCC and the RCC contributed significantly to giving the concept of human dignity a place in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Although ecumenism officially was a non-issue in Roman Catholic thinking in those days, we in fact see an example of strong ecumenical cooperation in this area from the very beginning. Therefore, I will first point to some of the most important stages of this ecumenical journey in which both the WCC and RCC have dealt with this issue after 1948. I do so with a special interest in the way the issue of human dignity was present in the documentation produced during this development. In the second part of this contribution I will identify some of the major theological questions these documents raise.

Ecclesial and Ecumenical Documents on Human Dignity, from 1948 onwards

It was the aforementioned Mgr. Roncalli who, eleven years later, would become well-known and deeply loved as Pope John XXIII, the pope who convened and inspired the (unexpected) Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). His influence on Roman Catholic teaching in this area can already be seen in the encyclical *Pacem in terris* (1963) and he certainly was behind what often has been regarded as 20th century Catholicism's most innovative document, the Council's Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae* (DH).[3] In June 1962 Cardinal Bea, then head of the new Vatican Secretariat for Christian Unity, drafted a first text on religious freedom for the Council's consideration.[4] Guided by this initiative, the Council saw human dignity as one of its key categories. This is especially clear from two of its final documents which, after the death of John XXIII and shortly before the closing of the Council, were promulgated on the same day, 7 December 1965, by John's successor, Pope Paul VI.

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* (GS),[5] takes the dignity of the human person as one of its basic theological categories. It forms the title of the first chapter of Part I that as a whole deals with the Church and man's calling. Human dignity also is referred to time and again in the second chapter of Part I on the community of humankind. It also plays a special role in chapter four on the role of the

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2   Cf. WCC, International Affairs, Peace & Human Security, *Human Rights and Churches: Challenges of a Globalized World*, Conference Report, Morges (Switzerland), January 2000. Online: http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/morges.html – June 6, 2007.

3   *Declaration on Religious Freedom 'Dignitatis Humanae'*, 1965. Online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm

4   At that time it was not clear if Bea was in fact entitled to take such action in his specific capacity. A few months later Pope John XXIII personally made it clear that in this respect the Secretariat had the same authority as other conciliar bodies.

5   *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World 'Gaudium et Spes'*, 1965. Online: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/index.htm

church in the modern world. In Part II of GS, which discusses some problems of special urgency, human dignity is a pivotal category in the chapter on marriage and family life in particular. Finally, references to this theme also can be found in the chapters on culture, social-economic life, politics and international relationships.

The aforementioned Declaration on Religious Freedom, *Dignitatis Humanae,* elaborates on an issue that is already alluded to in GS 73, namely human rights and more specifically, religious freedom. The very fact that this Declaration begins with *dignitatis humanae* is already meaningful. Here, freedom of conscience forms the core of the issue of human dignity.

From its side, the WCC continued to promote human rights over five decades. Its fifth assembly (Nairobi, 1975) adopted a policy statement on human rights. In the last decade of the twentieth century a new stimulus came from the Faith and Order Commission, which has for more than forty years functioned as a bridge between the ecumenical movement as visible in the WCC on the one hand and the RCC on the other. Faith and Order had been a (founding) part of the WCC, but the Roman Catholic tradition has been represented in Faith and Order on an equal footing with other traditions since 1963. This makes Faith and Order studies more representative of the ecumenical movement than any other kind of publication, and it illuminates the significance of a few recent ecumenical theological documents.

The issue of human dignity has been dealt with in the context of three consultations sponsored by Faith and Order together with Programme Unit III (Justice, Peace and Creation) of the WCC, the unit in charge of the issues of the conciliar process, i.e. justice, peace and the integrity of creation. These consultations, in the 1990s, focussed on the relationship between ecclesiology and ethics. The final consultation in Johannesburg in June 1996 approved the study document *Costly Obedience* (CO),[6] which dealt extensively with the possibility of common or shared human values or, in other words, a possible 'overlapping consensus'.

In December 1998 the eight assembly of the WCC met in Harare, Zimbabwe. This coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations (10 December 1948). At this occasion the assembly issued two documents. The first was a short formal public Declaration.[7] Apart from that the assembly adopted a more lengthy Statement on Human Rights,[8] a policy document and as such a follow-up to the one of the Nairobi 1975 assembly. In both the Harare documents, the Declaration *and* the Statement, the issue of human dignity is touched upon.

Seven Questions

What issues can one identify when analysing the ecumenical debate on human rights as it is documented in these developments? How and to what extent has the theme of human dignity been part of this history? Let me try to deal with some of the major questions in this area.

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6   For the full text, see: *Costly Obedience,* Johannesburg (South Africa), 1996. Online: http://www.oikoumene.org/ (search for 'costly obedience'). For earlier documents see online: *Costly Unity,* Rönde (Danmark), 1993. Online: http://www.oikoumene.org/ (June 6, 2007) (search for 'costly unity') and *Costly Commitment*, Jerusalem (Israel), 1994. Online: http://www.oikoumene.org/ (June 6, 2007) (search for 'costly commitment').

7   In D Kessler (ed.) 1999. *Together on the Way. Official Report of the Eight Assembly of the WCC*. Geneva: WCC, 192-194.

8   *Op. cit.* 195-205.

Question 1: Could the concept of human dignity be a solid basis for an ecumenical mutual understanding among Christians from different traditions? And could it play a role in furthering common views across religious and philosophical traditions as well?

Let me start where I finished my historical survey. The Harare Declaration begins by giving a full quote from the Preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In its own reflections the assembly then says: "As Christians, we believe that God created every person infinitely precious and endowed with equal dignity and rights".[9] The assembly confesses that churches and Christians have often failed to respect such equality, even in their own midst[10], and have not always stood up courageously for those whose rights and dignity were threatened or violated by discrimination, intolerance, prejudice and hatred. Sometimes they even have been the agents of such injustice themselves. Finally, the assembly declares:

> We recommit ourselves to the principles of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, and to promote and defend them in a way which takes into account [..., *inter alia*, LJK] the values and insights into human rights and dignity derived from the rich heritage of peoples' religions, cultures and traditions.[11]

Basically, we see two important lines of thought here. On the one hand the reference to a (supposed) common view on human dignity, shared by Christians and non-Christians alike, that made possible the UN's issue of the 1948 Declaration; this reference is reflected in the emphasis on 'the rich heritage of peoples' religions, cultures and traditions' in this respect. On the other hand we find the more specific Christian conviction of human dignity as related to the doctrine of creation.

Both approaches can be found in the Harare Statement as well, although this document does not explicitly refer to non-Christian views of human dignity. It only speaks in more general terms of "shared or complementary spiritual values and traditions that transcend religious and cultural boundaries in the interests of justice and peace in society".[12] The second theological line of thought is more clearly present. The Introduction to the Statement quotes from the first lines of the Report[13] of a preparatory consultation (Morges, 1998), on the theme *Human Rights and the Churches: New Challenges*. The quote reads:

> Within scripture, through tradition, and from the many ways in which the Spirit illumines our hearts today, we discern God's gift of dignity for each person and their inherent right to acceptance and participation within the community. From this flows the responsibility of the Church, as the body of Christ, to work for universal respect and implementation of human rights.[14]

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9   *Op. cit*. 193.

10   As to the issue of human rights within the churches, cf. my contribution "For external use only? Some Thoughts on Human Rights and Church Law" in this volume.

11   D Kessler (ed.) *op. cit.* 194.

12   *Op. cit.* 204.

13   See: *Human Rights and the Churches: New Challenges,* Morges (Switzerland), 1988. Online: http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/international/hrchall.html, June 6, 2007. The Report affirms with the Nairobi 1975 assembly "the right to personal dignity"; it reaffirms "the holistic, inclusive vision of the oikoumene for a peaceful, sustainable society based on justice and human dignity"; it identifies "threats to human dignity and freedom" like "the realities and consequences of colonialism and racism, the brutal authoritarianism of national security regimes, the subsuming of human rights to national development objectives by national political elites, and the imperatives of political loyalty generated by superpower rivalry and militarism"; and it says that "churches must renew and reaffirm their common commitment to the core values that uphold human life and dignity".

14   D Kessler (ed.) *op. cit.* 196.

The body of the Harare Statement begins by thanking God for the gift of life and for the dignity God has bestowed on all in creation. It then reaffirms the WCC commitment, i.e. the:

> Commitment to human rights, to the dignity and worth of the human person created in God's image and infinitely precious in God's sight, and to the equal rights of women and men, of young and old, of all nations and peoples.[15]

Thus the Harare assembly seems to presuppose that human dignity, theologically understood within the Christian tradition from the perspective of 'the human person created in God's image', can at the same time be a connecting category transcending all religious and philosophical traditions.

However, this approach seems to be questioned in the Faith and Order Paper *Costly Obedience* [CO]. In it there is only one explicit reference to human dignity, but the issue of a possibility of inter-religious and intercultural consensus is being dealt with extensively, as we see in par. 12-13 (first part):

> (12) Many scholars in the field of 'ethics' now search – independently of particular religious or ethnic traditions – for principles which can help us deal with the hard questions that arise for human beings as such, whatever their communal loyalties or backgrounds. (...) Ethicists deal with such questions by seeking to establish principles for 'post-conventional', and therefore potentially universal, forms of moral discourse. Such secular styles of ethical reasoning tend to relegate religious traditions as such to the private sphere. Safely insulated from the public world, these traditions can then be recognized as useful in forming people who will turn out to be good citizens. But traditional understandings of life are not, or at least not explicitly, considered appropriate points of reference for settling questions which these citizens will face in the public realm.

> (13) It is important for the Christian thinkers to be in touch with this contemporary search for a consistent 'post-conventional' ethic. Significant issues of human well-being are at stake. Indeed some 'Christian ethicists' today work mainly in this frame of reference, understanding it as a Christian duty to participate fully in humanity's search for the meaning of goodness, or principles for living together in peace on this planet with respect for the dignity of all persons. Yet it is clear that this quest for some sort of universal secular moral discourse – despite agreement on many practical matters such as the defence of human rights – has thus far failed to find common philosophical ground. Indeed, many of the questers have now largely abandoned the attempt to find foundations, in the sense of reality-grounded first principles, for moral argument.

There is no doubt that the concept of human dignity provides a solid basis for an ecumenical Christian mutual understanding. A judgment as to its value in terms of an inter-religious and philosophical exchange depends on how we deal with the next question.

Question 2: Could the concept of human dignity be of help in the universalism-relativism debate as it still continues in the area of international law and human rights?

In the area of human rights legal doctrine distinguishes between so-called universalist and relativist approaches. The former hold "that all human rights apply uniformly and with equal force throughout the world" and the latter "that in the application of human rights in concrete situations allowance should be made for particularities that attend cultural, ethnic

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[15]   *Op. cit.* 197.

or religious varieties".[16] Is it possible to support a universalist approach to human rights from the perspective of human dignity as based on the doctrine of creation?

The *Costly Obedience* report explicitly refers to this issue. Par. 85 reads:

> But how are we adequately to articulate such things, and particularly such notions as the 'global' or 'universal', today? We face post-modernism's penchant for the deconstruction of all large systems of thought as well as the power structures legitimated by them. On the one hand, such deconstruction very properly attacks the pride of certain great syntheses of the Western academic world: syntheses that assume, for example, that objectivizing human sciences are forms of discourse superior to the 'subjugated languages' of the poor and dispossessed. But on the other hand, such attitudes can be seen as demolishing, or at least undermining, the very notion of an ecumenical vision as itself a kind of global synthesis. Just at the moment we are trying to give ecumenism a new comprehensive meaning which might clarify the calling of the World Council of Churches, we find ourselves living in an age whose thinkers seek to dismantle all such large ideas. (...) But the very word *oikoumene* seems to violate this post-modern preference for particularity, evoking as it does the notion of the unity of the human race in the household of God. Can we still convincingly speak 'ecumenical' language?

Is it possible – if desirable or necessary at all – to deconstruct Western liberal world views without destroying any possibility of ecumenical consensus? Or is an alliance between Enlightenment[17] views of the universality of human rights on the one hand and an ecumenical emphasis on human dignity as a universal value on the other a questionable example of the captivity of the ecumenical movement in the 'project of modernity'?

Many current champions of a universalist approach to human rights in legal philosophy are representatives of the Western Enlightenment tradition. Obviously CO 85, in applauding "post-modernism's penchant for the deconstruction of all large systems of thought", would not accept the consequence that this kind of universalism should be rejected. However, what is presented as 'neutral' universalism in the human rights debate, is in fact based on a specific Western world view, which is not necessarily acceptable to other cultural and religious traditions. The second part of CO 13, directly following the text we have seen above, is aware of the problematic aspects of this secular rationality:

> (13) (…) Increasingly it becomes clear, even to some practitioners of the genre, that many putatively 'post-conventional' moral arguments are not tradition-independent at all. Rather, they covertly interpret values embedded in the cultures to which the thinkers in question belong. Even for ethicists, who proclaim their allegiance to a purely secular rationality, it seems that 'moral formation' of one sort or another plays an indispensable story-telling, symbol-making and motivating role.

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[16]   JD van der Vyver. 1996. 'Introduction', in JD van der Vyver and J Witte Jr. (eds.), *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective. Legal Perspectives*. Nijhoff: The Hague/Boston/London, IX-XLVII, XIV.

[17]   Cf. the analysis of Bert Hoedemaker, Anton Houtepen and Theo Witvliet in their introduction to ecumenism in Hoedemaker B, Houtepen A, Witvliet Th. 2005. *Oecumene als leerproces*. Zoetermeer: Meinema, 33-36.

It seems to me that the thoughtful approach of John Witte[18] to the issue of universalist versus relativist theories of human rights could and should be specified with regard to the issue of human dignity as an overarching category. Local violations of human rights have to be analysed through local study and must lead to the promotion of human rights norms based on a specific cultural and religious heritage. Universal norms cannot be sufficient in this respect. But such local solutions must be consistent with general religious and philosophical principles, which can no doubt build on a common concept of human dignity.

Question 3: Would a theological view of human rights based on the concept of human dignity necessarily imply that an approach of the essence of law in terms of 'natural law' is to be preferred rather than a positivistic approach?

Legal philosophy shows a major disagreement as to what 'law' exactly is. The issue is debated on a continuum between two poles. On the one extreme is a 'natural law' position which bases law on a more or less transcendent human awareness of what is right and wrong, and on the other extreme is a positivistic approach which takes positive law – the total of valid legal rules – as its point of departure without the need to say much about its being right or wrong, just or unjust.

It is no surprise, that the documents of Vatican II implicitly share the natural law approach. They build on traditional Roman Catholic teachings regarding nature and grace: *gratia naturam perficit*. Human dignity is a matter of reason as much as a matter of faith. DH states:

> The council further declares that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right. It is in accordance with their dignity as persons – that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility – that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth (...).[19]

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[18] "We need to parse the false dialectics of universalist versus relativist, Western versus non-Western theories of human rights to address the pressing problem of religious rights abuses. This problem needs to be addressed both locally and globally, legally and theologically. On the one hand, the many local forms of religious conflict and abuse must be assayed through local study and assuaged through locally-tailored human rights norms. No global norms on religious rights can be sufficiently precise to do justice to the needs of local religious rivals. Legal solutions to the problem of religious abuse will require detailed local understanding and intense cultivation of a local rights culture. On the other hand, any such local initiatives must be consistent with general principles of both law and theology. Prevailing international and constitutional norms on religious rights must be respected and extended to address the specific problems of religious rights abuse in various parts of the world", J Witte Jr., "Introduction", in: JD van der Vyver and J Witte Jr. (eds.), *Religious Human Rights in Global Perspective. Religious Perspectives*. The Hague – Boston – London 1996, XVII-XXXV, XXX

[19] DH 2, cf. DH 1. Cf. also GS 12: "But what is man? About himself he has expressed, and continues to express, many divergent and even contradictory opinions. In these he often exalts himself as the absolute measure of all things or debases himself to the point of despair. The result is doubt and anxiety. The Church certainly understands these problems. Endowed with light from God, she can offer solutions to them, so that man's true situation can be portrayed and his defects explained, while at the same time his dignity and destiny are justly acknowledged".

It is exactly this strong emphasis on human dignity as implying religious freedom in the sense of the freedom for people to act on their own judgment that should be recognised as the major innovation of Vatican II.[20] In this light par. 12 seems to be a bit too innocent:

> In faithfulness therefore to the truth of the Gospel, the Church is following the way of Christ and the apostles when she recognizes and gives support to the principle of religious freedom as befitting the dignity of man and as being in accord with divine revelation. Throughout the ages the Church has kept safe and handed on the doctrine received from the Master and from the apostles. In the life of the People of God, as it has made its pilgrim way through the vicissitudes of human history, there has at times appeared a way of acting that was hardly in accord with the spirit of the Gospel or even opposed to it. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Church that no one is to be coerced into faith has always stood firm.

> Thus the leaven of the Gospel has long been about its quiet work in the minds of men, and to it is due in great measure the fact that in the course of time men have come more widely to recognize their dignity as persons, and the conviction has grown stronger that the person in society is to be kept free from all manner of coercion in matters religious.

One could seriously question the statement that the RCC had always held 'that no one is to be coerced into faith'. However, the last sentence rightly points to the role of a Christian view of freedom of conscience, *in spite of* what has happened in long periods of the church's history.

The very dignity of the human person is known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself (DH 2). This view corresponds with an universalist approach in legal philosophy, as well as with an approach of the essence of law in terms of 'natural law': law is based on a human awareness of what is right and wrong. It seems to me that Protestant theology should basically support this conclusion, e.g. in line with the Reformed tradition of 'common grace' as expressed by Abraham Kuyper.[21]

Question 4: Is the concept of human dignity to be related to Christology, and what are the consequences in such a case?

A study of the main ecumenical policy documents and conference reports on human rights issues, at least in the European context, would undoubtedly show that the Christian doctrine of "the human person being created in God's image" is the main theological foundation of human dignity and human rights. It seems to be self-evident, and it functions stereo-typically. But could we, and should we, also link this with the biblical image of Christ as "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15)? In other words, what role can Christology play in a discussion on human dignity?

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[20] Cf. DH 3: "Truth, however, is to be sought after in a manner proper to the dignity of the human person and his social nature. The inquiry is to be free, carried on with the aid of teaching or instruction, communication and dialogue, in the course of which men explain to one another the truth they have discovered, or think they have discovered, in order thus to assist one another in the quest for truth".

[21] Cf.: "Hoe diep ook de moreele overtuiging zinke, voor recht komt nog een ieder op (…) Dit nu is alleen daaruit te verklaren, dat dit rechtsbesef ons als een soort 'instinct' is ingeprent, en dat, hoezeer de zonde ook dit Goddelijk instinct moge verzwakt hebben, God de Heere in zijn Gemeene Gratie deze betere qualiteit van ons bewustzijnsleven sterker dan eenige andere beveiligd en vastgezet heeft", A Kuyper. 1904. *De Gemeene Gratie*, III. Asterdam/Pretoria: Höveker & Wormser, 70f.

Vatican II refers to Jesus Christ first of all in terms of the divine example of respecting freedom of conscience.[22] In its final words the Harare policy *Statement* sees a more intrinsic Christological element:

> We affirm the emphasis of the gospel on the value of all human beings in the sight of God, on the atoning and redeeming work of Christ that has given every person true dignity, on love as the motive for action, and on love for one's neighbour as the practical expression of active faith in Christ. We are members one of another, and when one suffers all are hurt. This is the responsibility Christians bear to ensure the human rights of every person.[23]

So, the Harare policy Statement adds something to the formal Declaration by pointing to an Christological aspect of human dignity in terms of "the atoning and redeeming work of Christ that has given every person true dignity". Whereas in its message to the outsiders the WCC focuses on the commonality of human values, as it is related to the common nature of humankind as creation, internally it deepens this view by relating human dignity to the work of Christ.[24] But how exactly then can these two approaches be held together?

> Again, CO makes an interesting observation. In CO 14 it identifies the issue as follows:
> It is the more ironic, then, that increasing numbers of secular thinkers are heard to complain that 'Christian ethicists' who concern themselves with public issues have little to add to what one hears from the general run of thinkers indebted to the long tradition of liberal thought in Western modernity. Some secular ethicists are now saying they long to hear a distinctive note, something fundamentally different, something that could make a difference, from Christian colleagues. We need both to participate with others in the effort to articulate the public good and to find ways of speaking and acting publicly out of the riches of a distinctively Christian moral formation.

The necessary international debate on human rights requires the Christian community to draw upon its own specific religious heritage in order to contribute towards a common concept of human dignity. This raises the next more general question.

Question 5: How can specifically Christian ideas and principles of moral life be relevant in a wider debate on human dignity and human rights?

CO 15 identifies this question clearly and seems to be positive, but at the same time points to possible problems here within the ecumenical community:

> Formation within a particular faith community can generate indispensable resources for interaction with the world: it can help the faithful discover certain more generalizable ideas and foundational principles of moral life. The different Christian traditions have conceived the link between specific moral formation and generalizable ethical principles in different ways.

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[22] "Revelation (…) gives evidence of the respect which Christ showed toward the freedom with which man is to fulfil his duty of belief in the word of God and it gives us lessons in the spirit which disciples of such a Master ought to adopt and continually follow", DH 9. Cf. DH 11: "(...) God has regard for the dignity of the human person whom He Himself created and man is to be guided by his own judgment and he is to enjoy freedom. This truth appears at its height in Christ Jesus, in whom God manifested Himself and His ways with men (...)".

[23] D Kessler (ed.) *op. cit.* 205.

[24] A similar argument appears in the final document of the 9th WCC Assembly (Porto Alegre, 2006) on visible unity, *Called to be the One Church*, § 10: "The Church participates in the reconciling of the ministry of Christ, who emptied himself, when it lives out its mission, affirming and renewing the image of God in all humanity and working alongside all those whose human dignity has been denied by economic, political, and social marginalisation". For the full text, see: http://www.oikoumene.org/ (search for 'called to be the one church').

In other words, the awareness of the risk that general ideas in fact hide and/or legitimate existing power structures is no valid reason to abstain from the use of such ideas. It is precisely the link with local, culturally and religiously based application that makes it possible to deepen dialogue and unmask unjust structures.

Question 6: Is not the concept of human dignity as such too vague to further ecumenical mutual understanding?

I already have mentioned that Vatican II in GS links 'the dignity of the human person' with issues like the community of humankind, the church's role in the modern world, and marriage and family life. In other words, the Roman Catholic tradition seems to be more aware of the community aspects of 'human dignity' than Protestants. Historically and philosophically Protestantism is much closer to liberal, individualistic anthropological concepts.

This might indicate a major problem in ecumenical dialogue. Christian communities from different historical and confessional backgrounds may be able to find common ground on issues of social ethics like justice, peace, the integrity of creation or democracy, taking human dignity as a common point of departure. But, in the area of personal ethics (euthanasia, abortion, etc.) major problems arise. Here the concept of human dignity suddenly seems not to provide sufficient common ground. Especially in this area (Western) Protestant thinking often seems to have more in common with liberal, individualistic approaches than with Roman Catholic tradition. This tension brings me to my final question.

Question 7: Could the view of the church as a moral community, as developed in the ecumenical movement, play a role in distinguishing a Protestant interpretation of human dignity from a liberal, individualistic understanding?

Ecumenical dialogue as documented in *Costly Obedience* and the process preceding it focuses on the importance of seeing the church as a moral community. A clear presentation of this approach can be found in CO 76 where it draws the consequences of the role of moral formation within the Christian community:

> Such formation compels us to a bodily form of witness, a moral positioning, an engagement intrinsic to the persons we have become in the community of faith. It likewise shapes the community of faith itself to take an intrinsically moral role in relation to events around it. All this is one reality, one process, one journey, one experience. Not first this and then that, but this single, integral, way of life, seeing, hearing, thinking, doing. Not first a theological moment and then a practical moment but one stream of life shaped by the baptismal call to discipleship and eucharistic memory and thanksgiving which open us to participation in the historical movement of the Trinity through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The issue is taken up again in the final paragraph of CO (88):

> The key insight is that the Holy Spirit generates a kind of energy-field characterized by the recognizable 'resonance' of Christ's presence in the world. The identifiable presence of this resonance connects the many biblical and post-biblical forms of witness to Jesus Christ. God's incarnate presence in history indeed can be seen reflected in the ensemble of the many perspectives in which the spiritual, moral resonance implicit in Christ's life has been, and continues to be, known and appropriated by those who follow him. Each context of discipleship shapes us in a certain perspective on the world and thereby

one stream of life shaped by the baptismal call to discipleship and eucharistic memory and thanksgiving which open us to participation in the historical movement of the Trinity through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The issue is taken up again in the final paragraph of CO (88):

> The key insight is that the Holy Spirit generates a kind of energy-field characterized by the recognizable 'resonance' of Christ's presence in the world. The identifiable presence of this resonance connects the many biblical and post-biblical forms of witness to Jesus Christ. God's incarnate presence in history indeed can be seen reflected in the ensemble of the many perspectives in which the spiritual, moral resonance implicit in Christ's life has been, and continues to be, known and appropriated by those who follow him. Each context of discipleship shapes us in a certain perspective on the world and thereby generates a community having a certain recognizable character. The Holy Spirit instigates an energy-field of resonance among these perspectives.

Protestant theology, and more specifically theology in the framework of main-line Protestant churches, needs to take this very seriously, and explore its ecclesiological impact. Exactly at this point Protestantism has some homework to do, as it is already suggested in CO 15:

> The different Christian traditions have conceived the link between specific moral formation and generalizable ethical principles in different ways. These go back to different understandings of the church, and indeed to different ways of relating ecclesiology to christology. Where the church is understood as a new divine-human reality, as in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, the bridge from formation to ethical issues is possible only by way of a sacramental understanding of the world. The Reformation's grounding of the church in the faith-creating word maintains the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between God and human beings and hence also between God's justice and human justice. It is sceptical of attempts to base ethical reasoning in ecclesiology. The link can more easily be made on the basis of the ecclesiology of discipleship found in 'free church' thinking, where ethical decisions are seen as having directly to do with building God's kingdom. In each of these cases our task may be interpreted from the standpoint of Christian faith as the articulation of an inter-dependence graciously given with human life. We live in a constant struggle to show that the generative story of faith is at home with varying secular enterprises for giving meaning to the human condition.

Conclusion

Ecumenical co-operation has contributed to giving the concept of 'human dignity' a place in the debate on human rights. This concept provides a solid basis for an ecumenical Christian mutual understanding. At the same time it can function as an overarching category in inter-religious and philosophical exchange. Specific cultural and religious contents cannot be neglected in this debate. The very dignity of the human person is known through the revealed Word of God and by reason itself. This view corresponds with a universalist approach in legal philosophy, as well as with an approach of the essence of law in terms of 'natural law'. Protestant theology should draw upon its own traditions, e.g. the concept of 'common grace'. Exactly at this point Protestantism has to reconsider and strengthen its ecclesiological position on the church as a 'moral community' as well.