Christianity, Human Rights, and American Political Polarization

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Over the course of the twentieth century, American conceptions of rights became more global. This development—usually described as a move from "civil rights" to "human rights"—was especially acute in American Christian communities. The role of Christianity deserves our attention because of the religion's important role in the conceptualization, popularization, and practice of human rights in the United States and, thanks to Christians' overseas networks, to every corner of the world.[1] The increasingly global understanding of rights, however, did not lead to the liberalization of rights for American Christians. True, human rights talk contributed to important milestones in religious pluralism and the Civil Rights movement, and often served as a gateway to democratic liberalism for some groups resistant to the American liberal tradition. Human rights, however, were not only a liberal project. Conservatives also embraced human rights but in starkly different ways. The divergent interpretations of human rights were not merely a reflection of the growing political divide in the second half of the twentieth century. Christian activists' adoption of human rights helped forge new alliances and exacerbated the divide between liberal and conservative Christianity, and between political liberalism and political conservatism.

The three most important Christian groups involved in the American human rights debates were Catholics, evangelicals, and ecumenical Protestants. This last group, sometimes called "liberal" or "mainline" Protestants, was by far the largest and the most institutionally empowered for much of the early and mid-twentieth century. Ecumenical Protestants were present at the conference rooms where the United Nations (UN) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) were created, and they mobilized millions of Americans in support of these initiatives. These predominantly white elites arrogantly positioned themselves as the custodians of human rights, presenting their particular views as universal.[2] Their 1940s-era global vision was premised on a world government—a "league of nations with teeth," as *Time* magazine put it—alongside diminished racism, autonomy for colonial people, an empowered labor movement, and intellectual and religious freedom.[3] This ambitious international project was rooted

[1]Beginning in the early twentieth century, some ecumenical Protestant missionary organizations began emphasizing social work over proselytizing, which diminished their adherence to racial and religious hierarchies. See David A. Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton, NJ, 2017); and Kathryn Gin Lum, *Heathen: Religion and Race in American History* (Cambridge, MA, 2022), 208–21.

[2]Andrew Preston, "The Limits of Brotherhood: Race, Religion, and World Order in American Ecumenical Protestantism," *The American Historical Review* 127, no. 3 (Sep. 2022): 1222–51; Gene Zubovich, "For Human Rights Abroad, against Jim Crow at Home: The Political Mobilization of American Ecumenical Protestants in the World War II Era," *Journal of American History* 105, no. 2 (Sep. 2018): 267–90.

[3]"American Malvern," *Time*, Mar. 16, 1942, 44–8.

in the long history of the ecumenical movement, missionary networks, and worldwide travel. But its consequences would be felt in the United States, where ecumenical leaders argued big changes were required.

Inspired by their global outlook, ecumenical Protestants mobilized in arenas traditionally framed under the banner of "civil rights," which is why historians have missed this important episode in American human rights history. Ecumenical Protestants understood the problem of human rights to exist not only in international law but also in the Civil Rights movement and labor organizing campaigns. "I do not believe that the problems of peace within, and peace between nations can be isolated from each other," wrote pacifist A. J. Muste in 1942.[4] Indeed, what made human rights distinctive from the 1940s through the 1960s was that so many of its backers collapsed the logic of national boundaries, reframing "national" and "international" injustice into the singular category of the human.

Why did ecumenical Protestants become forerunners of human rights? The Protestant personalist tradition created a distinctive language of the "dignity" of the "human person" that would later appear in the UN's charter and its UDHR. The personalist tradition had roots stretching back to turn-of-the-century Boston University, a Methodist institution, where philosopher Borden Parker Bowne formulated it as a response to the materialism and social Darwinism of sociologist Herbert Spencer. Over time, the language of personalism and the "social gospel" became entwined, so that by the 1940s the dignity of the human person became synonymous with the social and economic rights promoted by the New Deal, which found their way into the UDHR.[5]

Black church leaders in the ecumenical movement had developed a globally framed antiracist vision that was more ambitious and more consistent than the view of their white colleagues.[6] But when compared with other white liberal groups, white ecumenical Protestants were more receptive to antiracist ideas thanks to their enthusiasm for human rights. African American educator Benjamin Mays persuaded the Federal Council of Churches that creating a postwar peace premised on human rights required the United States to desegregate. Several ecumenical organizations took this argument seriously and called for the end of Jim Crow in 1946, years before other predominantly white liberal groups would do the same. And ecumenical Protestants made the connection between international affairs and antiracist domestic reforms before this way of thinking became popular in the Cold War context.[7] For these reasons, when the Federal Council of Churches published its own list of human rights in 1948, it was not only pushing for the same social and economic rights that were embedded in the Universal Declaration. Its human rights document was largely received as an antiracist manifesto.[8]

The language of human rights remained popular among ecumenical Protestants during the early Cold War but it also reflected growing polarization in that community. Some ecumenical Protestants created a civil religion around human rights—pageantry, ceremony, and rituals that drew on Protestant practice but were expressed in nonsectarian ways—that focused on the evils of racism. Others, like John Foster Dulles, preferred the nomenclature of "individual personality" and "individual rights" as a tool to shame the Soviet Union abroad and promote free enterprise at home. The divisions only worsened with the student movements, Civil Rights

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[4]A. J. Muste, "Social Bases for a just and Durable Peace," [sic], Jan. 30, 1942, folder 9, box 28, Record Group 18, Federal Council of Churches Papers, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, PA.

[5]Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900–1950* (Louisville, KY, 2003); Gene Zubovich, "American Protestants and the Era of Anti-Racist Human Rights," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 79, no. 3 (Sep. 2018): 427–43.

[6]Sarah Azaransky, *This Worldwide Struggle: Religion and the International Routes of the Civil Rights Movement, 1935–1959* (New York, 2017); Barbra D. Savage, "Benjamin Mays, Global Ecumenism, and Local Religious Segregation," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 785–806.

[7]Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000).

[8]Gene Zubovich, *Before the Religious Right: Liberal Protestants, Human Rights, and the Polarization of the United States* (Philadelphia, 2022), 150–74.

movement, and antiwar protests of the 1960s, which often employed the rhetoric of human rights.[9] At the end of that decade, the World Council of Churches launched a campaign to end colonialism and white minority rule in Southern Africa, a massive human rights mobilization that was panned as pro-communist by American conservatives.[10]

While ecumenical organizations offered explicitly religious defenses of human rights, activism also functioned as a gateway to nonreligious institutions. Lutheran activist Gerhard Elston, for example, had spent the 1950s organizing American Protestant youth groups against Apartheid, and he became involved in sit-ins and anti-Vietnam war protests in the 1960s. But in the late 1970s he began working for Amnesty International as its executive director. As Sarah Snyder shows, ecumenical Protestants' global connections and theological values meant that they were overrepresented in the ranks of human rights groups like the Washington Office on Latin America and the Committee for Human Rights in Korea.[11] In other words, the human rights movement encouraged cooperation between religious and secular liberals by offering a shared language and emphasizing shared values.

American Catholics had a different relationship with human rights. Whereas American Protestants had absorbed the liberal rights tradition of the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Constitution as their own, despite the documents' Deist and Enlightenment origins, Catholic clergy remained more skeptical. Catholicism was a minority religion under siege by the Protestant majority. It was led by a Europe-oriented clergy that was suspicious of individual freedoms, pluralism, volunteerism, religious liberty, and the separation of church and state. These ideas were denounced as "Americanism" in 1899 by Pope Leo XIII. By the 1940s many Catholics had adopted the same personalist language of "dignity" and "human personality" as ecumenical Protestants. Several Catholic theologians were also avid supporters of human rights in the 1940s. Jacques Maritain, partly inspired by his stay in the United States during World War II, played a central role in global human rights debates. But this convergence belied the different paths ecumenical Protestants and Catholics took to human rights.

During the 1930s, some European Catholic intellectuals did become vocal proponents of human rights. Why they did so remains contested, but scholars mostly agree that the move to human rights did not indicate the adoption of liberal values.[12] It would not be until the end of the 1950s that the Catholic turn to rights, begun overseas, would come to fruition in the United States with the publication of Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray's *We Hold These Truths*. Murray embraced the American Bill of Rights as a "tributary" to the Catholic natural law tradition. The U.S. Declaration of Independence cited God as the ultimate authority guaranteeing rights, he explained. Rights "inhere in man antecedent to any act of government."[13]

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[9]David P. Cline, *From Reconciliation to Revolution: The Student Interracial Ministry, Liberal Christianity, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016); Sara M. Evans, *Journeys That Opened Up the World: Women, Student Christian Movements, and Social Justice, 1955–1975* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2003); James F. Findlay, *Church People in the Struggle: The National Council of Churches and the Black Freedom Movement, 1950–1970* (New York, 1993); Jill K. Gill, *Embattled Ecumenism: The National Council of Churches, the Vietnam War, and the Trials of the Protestant Left* (DeKalb, IL, 2011).

[10]Claude E. Welch, "Mobilizing Morality: The World Council of Churches and Its Program to Combat Racism, 1969–1994," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2001): 863–910.

[11]Sarah Snyder, *From Selma to Moscow: How Human Rights Activists Transformed U.S. Foreign Policy* (New York, 2018).

[12]Giuliana Chamedes, *A Twentieth-Century Crusade: The Vatican's Battle to Remake Christian Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2019); James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA, 2018); Marco Duranti, *The Conservative Human Rights Revolution: European Identity, Transnational Politics, and the Origins of the European Convention* (New York, 2017); Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia, 2015).

[13]John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (New York, 1960), 51–2.

Murray's *We Hold These Truths* subsumed the discussion of American rights into the global Catholic human rights tradition in emphasizing the pregovernmental rights rooted in nature, their universal application beyond the particulars of U.S. history and the country's laws, as well as rights' embeddedness in responsibilities articulated in natural law. Murray went to great lengths to distinguish his understanding of rights from French Republicanism and from contemporary liberals' understanding of the American past. "The American Bill of Rights is not a piece of eighteenth-century rationalist theory; it is far more the product of Christian history," he wrote. "The 'man' whose rights are guaranteed in the face of law and government is, whether one knows it or not, the Christian man, who had learned to know his own personal dignity in the school of Christian faith."[14]

Paradoxically, it was Murray's importation of a Europe-centered theological and legal tradition that acted as a bridge to Americanism for many Catholic clergy in the United States. It came at a moment when unionization and the GI Bill propelled the upward mobility of American Catholics and the limited pluralism of Judeo-Christian America welcomed Catholics into public life.[15] But the human rights bridge to Americanism also often functioned as a bridge to conservatism. Conservative commentator William F. Buckley praised Murray's views because they were explicitly framed as a rebuke of liberalism.[16] Human rights became a shared language among conservative constituencies and a signal of a commitment to anticommunism, religious freedom, and antisecularism. By embracing human rights, conservative Catholics gave up some of their communitarian values and embraced some individualistic and pluralistic values, but in ways that helped build bridges to the conservative movement and to conservative evangelicals in the late twentieth century.[17]

Evangelicals were the last major Christian group to turn to human rights. When the modern evangelical movement was organized in the 1940s, its leaders had rejected the human rights project because of its links with liberal Protestantism, a religious community they viewed as essentially globalist, secular, and socialist. Human rights were "godless," wrote an evangelical columnist in 1945. The UDHR's social and economic rights were "socialist," argued an evangelical liaison to the State Department in 1956.[18] For much of the 1950s and 1960s, the evangelical movement focused narrowly on the human rights of victims of communism in central and eastern Europe. But as human rights became more popular in the United States in the 1970s, evangelicals began to broaden their activism. It helped that ecumenical Protestants by that point were entering a period of crisis, with plummeting church attendance and financial shortfalls. There was a small evangelical left that sometimes spoke about human rights, but the vast majority of the movement's leaders framed human rights in the same way as other conservative constituencies did: as anticommunist, antisecular, focused on religious freedom, and concerned about Christian persecution, albeit in ways that began to include nonwhite Christian victims.[19] In this way, on the eve of Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, evangelicals were better positioned to make common cause with other conservatives.

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[14]Ibid., 53.

[15]K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (New York, 2019); Kevin Michael Schultz, *Tri-Faith America: How Catholics and Jews Held Postwar America to Its Protestant Promise* (New York, 2011).

[16]Patrick Allitt, *Catholic Intellectuals and Conservative Politics in America, 1950–1985* (Ithaca, NY, 2019), 37–8.

[17]On the tenuousness of these alliances, see Neil J. Young, *We Gather Together: The Religious Right and the Problem of Interfaith Politics* (New York, 2016).

[18]Gene Zubovich, "Christian Globalism, Christian Nationalism, and the Ecumenical-Evangelical Rivalry," in *Global Faith, Worldly Power: Evangelical Internationalism and U.S. Empire*, eds. John Corrigan, Melani McAlister, and Axel R. Shäfer (Chapel Hill, NC, 2022), 145–71.

[19]Lauren Frances Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (Ithaca, NY, 2020).

By the 1980s, human rights mobilizations by American Christian communities reflected growing divisions within individual Christian traditions and a realignment of American religion (and politics) into liberal and conservative blocs. For example, the Maryknoll nuns' criticism of state violence in Guatemala and El Salvador received backing from liberal Democrats in Congress, while Catholic antiabortion activist Paul Marx's defense of the right to life of the unborn received a sympathetic hearing from Reagan's White House.[20] Ecumenical and evangelical Protestants had similar internal divisions and partisan political alignments, which stemmed partly from their narrow identification of human rights victims despite the purported universality of human rights. Over time, denominational and religious boundaries gave way to "liberal" and "conservative" identities.

The language of human rights encouraged these trends and helped create new political coalitions. Scholars have shown that by the 1970s there were two distinct human rights discourses, one liberal and the other conservative.[21] But too little attention has been paid to how human rights reshaped the boundaries between different religious traditions, and between religious and secular groups. That process began well before the 1970s, and it bridged the divide between domestic and foreign policy. As devout Americans embraced an increasingly global conception of rights, they forged new alliances and created new divisions—ones with important political ramifications for the United States. By offering a common, purportedly universal language with the potential of minimizing some religious divisions—but one open to drastically different interpretations—the advent of human rights facilitated the realignment of American politics.

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[20]Theresa Keeley, *Reagan's Gun-Toting Nuns: The Catholic Conflict over Cold War Human Rights Policy in Central America* (Ithaca, NY, 2020); Kathryn Slattery, "Building a 'World Coalition for Life': Abortion, Population Control and Transnational Pro-Life Networks, 1960–1990" (PhD diss., University of New South Wales, 2010).

[21]See, for example, Barbara J. Keys, *Reclaiming American Virtue: The Human Rights Revolution of the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA, 2014); and Vanessa Walker, *Principles in Power: Latin America and the Politics of U.S. Human Rights Diplomacy* (Ithaca, NY, 2020).