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“I HAVE A DREAM” – RELIGION MATTERS FOR THE REDUCTION OF INEQUALITY (SDG 10)

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic brought forth a number of negative records. Here is yet one more. The year 2020 marked the steepest increase in global billionaires' share of wealth on record, according to the World Inequality Report (WIR) (Chancel et al. 2022: 20). Since 1995, the share of global wealth owned by billionaires has increased from 1% to now over 3%. This means that the world's richest 1% own twice as much as the bottom 90%. And there is injustice even in injustice because it is far more men holding wealth than women. Globally, men possess 50% more in wealth than women, as a report by Oxfam finds (Oxfam International 2020).

Not only is global wealth unequally distributed, but income inequalities also abound. The poorest half of the global population earn 8.5% of the global income, while the richest 10% currently take 52%. And one more aspect sticks out: Inequality is also distributed unequally. The MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region is the most unequal region in the world, while Europe has the lowest inequality levels. In terms of personal discrimination, almost one in five people have personally experienced discrimination on at least one of the grounds prohibited under international human rights law (UNDESA n.d.; cf. SDG 10), according to data from 44 countries and territories for the period 2014–2020. This data also show that women were more likely to become victims of discrimination than men. Moreover, the number of refugees globally has reached its highest level on record, with the war in the Ukraine adding millions to the numbers of both internally displaced people and people forced to leave their home countries.

With inequalities that pronounced, we will not be able to address the challenges of the 21st century “without significant redistribution of wealth and income inequality” (Chancel et al., 2022: 20). SDG 10 therefore calls to “reduce inequality

within and among countries”. And some progress has indeed been made. Over the past decades, global inequalities between countries have declined. Before the pandemic, modest gains were made in “reducing income inequality in some countries and territories, continuing preferential trade status for lower-income countries and territories and decreasing transaction costs for remittances” (UNDESA n.d.; cf. SDG 10). Sending a \$200 remittance cost 6.3% in 2021 as compared to 9.3% in 2011, bringing it closer to the international target of 5%. As we struggle for more equality on all levels, we also need to ask, what is the role of religion in all of this?

Religion and Human Rights: No Love at First Sight

All matters of inequality come together in the struggle for human rights. It therefore comes as no surprise that the foundational document of human rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), adopted in 1948, makes equality fundamental. Already the Preamble of the UDHR is a powerful witness to the equality of everyone, calling for the “recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family” (UN 1948: para 1). This fundamental feature of the equality of all is then spelled out in different contexts, including equality in dignity and rights (Art. 1), equality before the law (Art. 7), equality of men and women, particularly regarding marriage (Art. 16), and equal pay for equal work (Art. 23).

When the UDHR was proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris on December 10, 1948, it set out, for the first time, universal fundamental human rights. The UDHR then paved the way for the adoption of over 70 human rights treaties at a global and regional level. Drafted by representatives from different religious and cultural backgrounds, the UDHR was set against the experiences of the horrors of two world wars. There was acute awareness that national law by itself is insufficient for protecting the dignity of all. Rather, overarching standards are needed that every member of the human family can appeal to. In the struggle for human rights, religion has played a rather ambiguous role, however.

In the European context, the idea of human dignity at the root of human rights was influenced by the Greek-Roman tradition of Stoa, on the one hand, and the Christian tradition, on the other. While Cicero, for example, sees reason as foundational for human dignity, the Christian tradition points out that humans are created in the image of God (Gen 1:26) and that all humans are children of God (Gal 3:26–28). Despite these strong resources within the Christian tradition, Christian churches and theology for a long time had difficulties with the ideas of human dignity and human rights. These difficulties had partly theological reasons. The doctrine of original sin, for instance, was understood in a way as if sin had damaged human dignity. Other difficulties were based on political and social reasons such as the link between human rights and the French Revolution with its terror and its explicitly anti-church agenda. It was only the experiences of two world wars that would lead the churches and Christian theology to realise the

necessity for universal human rights. Since then, especially the emerging global ecumenical movement and its conciliatory process for “Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation” have become very fruitful for religious and interreligious human rights discourse and engagement.

Wanted: Religious Actors as “Immanent Critics” for Human Rights

The example of the historical development of the relationship between the Christian faith tradition and human rights yields two important lessons: First, human rights are *open to* different, particular foundations. From its inception, the UDHR included the insights and wisdom of different cultures and faith traditions. And second, human rights are *dependent on* different, particular foundations. Both lessons have far-reaching implications for human rights today. The idea of universal human rights needs to develop strong roots in each and every religious and non-religious tradition in order to avoid erosion. As a report by the Human Rights Watch puts it: “Human rights cannot truly go global unless it goes deeply local” (Marthoz & Saunders 2005: 2). We, as global citizens from vastly different religious and cultural backgrounds, therefore need to work out how our own specific tradition connects with human rights. This means, we need people who act as “immanent critics” (Michael Walzer) from within their own religious tradition, doing the theological and hermeneutical work necessary to show how human rights resonate with their own respective tradition. Granted, this might be a lot easier for some of the 30 rights encompassed by the UDHR than for others. Yet the fact that it might not be possible for all 30 rights for each and every particular tradition does not dispense from the struggle. There is a lot of common ground that has not yet been trodden. We all need to “own” human rights, yet without becoming exclusivist about it. Otherwise, human rights stand in danger of being perceived as something foreign, external, or “Western” (Schliesser 2021). In the following, we will see how the different dimensions of religion can be used – or misused – in the quest for equality and human rights.

Religion as Community: Exclusion and Embrace

Equality can also be framed in terms of participation and inclusion. And again, religion in terms of community can be used to exclude “the other”, minorities, foreigners, etc. This happens oftentimes when religion is merged with the large community called the “nation state”. In Pakistan, for example, “the creed of National Islamization has been used as a stick to beat all emancipatory and human rights movements”, taking “a particularly heavy toll on the rights of women and religious minorities” (Jahangir 2000: 168f.). In a somewhat similar vein, the dramatic rise of Hindu nationalism in India resulted in a decline of minority rights as “the promotion and tolerance of attacks on women, Muslims, Christians, and Dalits has increased” (Chandra 2021: n.p.). At the same time, the community

aspect of religion can serve to create relationships and support inclusion even across ethnic, religious, or national boundaries. One particular powerful example is the youth gathering at Rakvere's Karmeli Church in Estonia on April 16, 2022, in the middle of the ongoing war in Ukraine. This gathering, organised by the Baptist Church in Estonia, brought together young people from Estonia, Russia, and Ukraine in order to build community and relationships despite the divisions created by politics, culture, or language (Raihhelgauz 2022).

Religion as Practice: The Power of Non-violence and Love

Just as there are religiously inspired practices that support inequality, religious practices can also become potent sources in the struggle for equality and for human rights. One of these practices is non-violence. Mahatma Gandhi's struggle against the British Empire was famously characterised by a form of non-violence that Gandhi referred to as *satyagraha*, meaning "truth-force" or "love-force". Drawing on the Hindu cardinal virtue of *satya*, holding to truth and integrity, Gandhi connected *satya* with active and loving non-violence (Ardley 2003: 24f.). To practise *satyagraha* means seeking truth and love while refusing, through non-violent resistance, to take part in anything believed to be wrong. Gandhi connected the practice of *satyagraha* with other spiritual practices such as fasting as a way to purify oneself. Later, Gandhi's practice of non-violence inspired Martin Luther King Jr., whose "I have a dream"-speech of 1963 became a symbol for the struggle against racial inequality (Carson 2013). Martin Luther King Jr. connected Christianity to Gandhi's teachings. "I came to see for the first time that the Christian doctrine of love operating through the Gandhian method of non-violence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom" (King 1986: 38).

Religion as Institutions: Influential Allies for Human Rights

Religious institutions can be strongholds for harbouring and perpetuating inequality and gross human rights abuses. Prominent current examples include the discovery of abuse and deaths of hundreds of indigenous children by educational institutions operated by the Roman Catholic Church in Canada (Honderich 2021). At the same time, the institutional dimension of religion can become a powerful ally in the struggle for human rights. One example is the alliance of multiple religious organisations and institutions formed in the Jubilee 2000 campaign. Rooted in the Hebrew Bible's prescription (Lev 25) that at certain points in time economic relations should be reset, including the cancellation of debts and the returning of land and wealth, the Jubilee 2000 campaign advocated the cancellation of poor countries' debt. "The centrality of the religious frame drew faith-based organisations to the forefront of the campaign" (Freeman 2020: 66). Numerous religious institutions including the Vatican, different national councils of Catholic Bishops, the WCC, the Bishops of the Anglican Communion, and

various FBOs and NGOs united in pushing for debt cancellation. And they did so with success. Eventually, in 1999 the G8 Cologne Summit adopted the HIPC-Initiative. Due to the HIPC-Initiative, about \$70 billion of odious debts of 35 of the poorest countries were cancelled. This allowed these countries to focus their resources less on paying back debts to donor countries and more on sustainable developmental endeavours.

Religion as Framework: Transforming Mindsets

With its holistic perspective, encompassing the material and the spiritual, the cognitive and the emotional, religion is uniquely positioned to address issues that are deeply embedded in structures and cultures. This power can be wielded for good and for bad. The theological justification of the South African apartheid regime is one example of the perverted power of this *Weltanschauung* dimension of religion. At the same time, the very same Christian religion that was employed to justify structural human rights violations was turned to as a potent resource for critiquing the apartheid system. In 1982, The World Alliance of Reformed Churches under its South African leader Allan Boesak condemned the South African apartheid system as “sin”. “We declare with black Reformed Christians of South Africa that apartheid (‘separate development’) is a sin, and that the moral and theological justification of it is a travesty of the Gospel” (quoted in de Gruchy & Villa-Vicencio 1983: 170). Human Rights Watch points to various civil rights movements that were powerfully inspired by religion. “The role U.S. and English Protestant churches in the anti-slavery campaigns, in the Congo reform movement, and in solidarity with Armenian victims in the late days of the Ottoman Empire belong to the best chapters of the history of the human rights movement” (Marthoz & Saunders 2005: 5). And even today, it is a religious figure – the Dalai Lama – who is prominently guiding the Tibetans’ ongoing quest for freedom.

Pauline Kollontai’s spotlight from a Jewish perspective will now serve to highlight the role of Judaism in the context of democracy and minority rights in Israel.

Spotlight: A Jewish Perspective on Democracy and Minority Rights in Israel (Pauline Kollontai)

Context

In 1948, the Founding Declaration of the Establishment of Israel stated that Israel is a sovereign Jewish and democratic state, and that its values are “based on freedom, justice and peace as envisaged by the Prophets of Israel” and will be implemented through “complete equality of social and political rights to all Israel’s inhabitants irrespective of religion, race or sex” (Ben-Gurion 1948: 3). Statistics at the end of 2020 show that Israel has a Jewish majority population of 6.8 million, an Arab population of 1.95 million (Muslim Arabs are 1.88 million; Christian Arabs

are 61,330), and a non-Arab population of 459,000 (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics [ICBS] 2020).

Israeli Arab Community

Both Muslim and Christian Arabs have their own autonomous education systems, and own and operate hospitals and nursing homes. Both have freedom to practise their religion in public. Arab local authorities manage Arab towns but their presence in Israeli state departments and ministerial offices remains extremely low. In comparison with the economic and educational situation of Jewish citizens there are significant inequalities for the Arab community; the gap between them and Jews has widened and the poverty rate amongst Israeli Arabs is four times higher than of Israeli Jews.

The Status of Human and Minority Rights

During the 1980s, work began on the development of two new Basic Laws that addressed human rights. In 1992, Knesset passed *The Basic Law on Human Dignity and Liberty (BLHDL)* and *The Basic Law on Freedom and Occupation*. The *BLHDL* was important as its central aim is “to protect human dignity and liberty of all Israel’s citizens” (Knesset *BLHDL* 1992: Sec. 1). Minority rights received official attention during 2003–2004 as part of discussions headed up by the Constitution, Law and Justice Commission (CLJC) on the drafting of a written Constitution. Awareness of the vulnerability of Israel’s minority groups was evident. However, there has been no further official consideration of this issue.

Focus: Religious Rights for Israel’s Arab Minority

Freedom and protection for all Israeli citizens to practise their religion is recognised by the state and supported by criminal law. Despite these legal provisions, the number of religiously motivated attacks on Israel’s non-Jewish communities has risen since 2006. Attacks are carried out mainly by Jewish religious youths connected to fundamentalist groups within the Orthodox and *Haredi* communities such as *Arvut Hadadit* (Mutual Responsibility). Other Jewish fundamentalist organisations such as *Gush Emunim* (Block of Faithfulness) propagate ideas and beliefs based on their “Greater Land of Israel” exclusionist ideology.

Attacks range from physical and verbal attacks on Muslim and Christian clerics and lay people, damage to their personal properties, damage to churches, mosques, cemeteries, and other holy sites. In more extreme attacks there has been loss of life. In January 2016, the complex of the Dormition Abbey of the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem was vandalised, and graffiti painted in red on walls saying, “Christians go to hell”, and “Christians the enemies of Israel”, which was accompanied by a Star of David. In 2018, Muslim women wearing hijab were verbally and physically abused in East Jerusalem. In January 2020, a mosque in the Sharafat area of East

Jerusalem was set on fire and anti-Muslim slogans painted on the walls. State-backed interference concerning ownership and use of Muslim and Christian holy places and non-religious property also occurs. In 2016, the “Nature and Parks Authority demolished 12 gravestones in the Muslim Bab al-Rahmeh cemetery because the gravestones lay in an expanded area of the cemetery that Israel considers a national park” (United States Office of International Religious Freedom [USOIRF] 2016: 44). In 2017, the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate (GOP) petitioned the Jerusalem District Court (JDC) contesting the forced transfer of church property rights of three of their buildings to a Jewish religious–Zionist organisation, Ateret Cohanim, populating East Jerusalem neighbourhoods with Jewish residents. The local court rejected the GOP petition, and it was subsequently rejected by Israel’s Supreme Court (Surkes 2019: 1). The case was reopened in November 2019, but the Court again ruled in favour of Ateret Cohanim (Staff 2020).

Justification by Israeli Jewish fundamentalists for attacks are based on the biblical idea of the Promised Land given by God to the Israelites (Gen 15:15–2; Josh 1:4–7). They believe modern day Israel is the new manifestation of this Promised Land and that it is only for Jews. Their arguments for total rule of the land of Israel and the subjugation of Israel’s non-Jews are further justified by appealing to texts from the Books of Deuteronomy and Numbers where the ancient Israelites are commanded to occupy all of Canaan and dispose of its existing inhabitants (Deut 20:12–18; Num 33:50–53). Some Jewish fundamentalists also use a basic tenant of *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism) that the Jewish soul and body are superior to the non-Jewish soul and body.

Challenging Jewish Fundamentalists

Jewish teachings of *Va’havtem et ha-Ger* (love of stranger) and *Ve’ahabthah le-re’akha* (love of neighbour) are central to challenging Jewish fundamentalists. The duty and responsibility to care for and love the stranger appear 36 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. Examples of these can be found in Leviticus 19:33–34, “When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not wrong him. The stranger who resides with you shall be to as one of your citizens; you shall love him as yourself”. Further teachings on this issue are found in Leviticus 23:22, 24:22, and in Exodus 22:21. The importance of not oppressing the stranger appears in Exodus 23:9; practising justice towards the stranger is specified in Deuteronomy 24:18; and unjust treatment is identified as a serious violation of God’s commands in Deuteronomy 27:19. Other teachings provide a code of behaviour between neighbours. Examples are found in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:1–17). In Leviticus, the importance of treating a neighbour fairly and not perverting justice is stated (Lev 19:15). Treatment of stranger and neighbour are encapsulated in the command, “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Lev 19:18). Disregard for love of neighbour could have serious consequences and result in God’s punishment according to 2nd century Rabbinic thought (ARNA. 16). Some Jewish scholars argue that the neighbour teachings apply only to Jews, but others,

including Rabbi Ben Azzai (2 CE), Rabbi Hirschensohn, an Orthodox Zionist (1857–1935), and Rabbi Hammer (1933–2019), believe the concept of neighbour to be applicable to Jews and non-Jews.

Examples of how these teachings towards stranger/neighbour are being practised in Israel today are seen in the work of Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR) and *Tag-Meir* (Light Tag) (TM). RHR founded in the 1980s consists of Israeli rabbis and rabbinical students from different streams of Judaism. RHR's work focuses on Palestinian rights in the Occupied Territories and the rights of the Bedouin community located in the Negev. RHR do human rights work, legal advocacy/intervention, and engage in non-violent protests. In the run up to the 2015 Israeli election, RHR released several public statements identifying the teachings of love of stranger as Jewish responsibilities that they stated are an essential aspect to voting.

TM is an umbrella organisation founded in 2011 comprising of individuals and organisations across the religious and secular spectrums to advocate and implement the Jewish values of openness, tolerance, and respect for all Israelis as well as promote interreligious understanding. TM seeks to help victims of racism and violence amongst Israel's minorities through advocacy, legal help, material support, and holding vigils. Demonstrations, meetings, and other activities to raise public awareness are used to challenge the general public and government on rights violations. In reaction to the burning of the mosque in Sharafat in 2020, members of TM took a group of over 200 Jews to the burned-out mosque to meet the Imam and residents of the neighbourhood to express their condemnation of the attack, their feelings of shame, and to offer help with the clean-up and renovations.

Conclusion

The track record of the Israeli state shows that promotion and protection of the rights of its minority communities has been insufficient, and in recent years has significantly deteriorated. This is a product of a dominant Jewish Orthodox standpoint which disrespects Jewish teachings on care for stranger and neighbour, and exists alongside the fluctuating levels of Israel's liberal democracy, which has undergone a significant shift since 2006 to the political right. However, examples such as RHR and TM show not only how the constructive resources of religion become visible, but they also demonstrate that significant parts of civil society are not willing to succumb to sacralised right wing ideology.