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CAN CHRISTIANITY INSPIRE A GLOBAL CULTURE?

UNIV Forum 2010

PRESENTATIONS

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UNIV Forum Scientific Committee
Universidad de Navarra

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THE CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVE

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ABSTRACT

The essay would be a review on the present state of society, of which is dominated a largely secularist worldview. It is an attempt to expose the inherent philosophical inconsistencies as well as the adverse effects of a distorted secularist ideology. The arguments presented within this work would allow one to see that a secularist state that is void of morality and religion is not a viable option; instead it would lead down the road of despair and even perhaps the collapse of civilizations.

However, simultaneously, the essay is also concerns the proposal of a Christian alternative to secularism. It is my feeble attempt to illustrate the hope that the Christian faith offers; to remedy the despair that may be caused by a distorted idea of secularism. It is my goal to show that a society that is rooted in the Christian faith and the values that flow from it, would create an environment which encourages the goal of all civilizations, i.e. human flourishing.

PAPER

“Christianity has functioned for the normative self-understanding of modernity as more than a mere precursor or a catalyst. Egalitarian universalism, from which sprang the ideas of freedom and social solidarity, of an autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, of the individual morality of conscience, human rights, and democracy, is the direct heir to the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of continual critical appropriation and reinterpretation. To this day, there is no alternative to it. And in the light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we continue to draw on the substance of this heritage. Everything else is just idle postmodern talk.”¹ – Jürgen Habermas (atheist philosopher)

For Christianity to inspire global culture, Christians must first acknowledge the reality of the situation; to see things as they really are. Many remain ignorant of what is at stake. Due to this ignorance, many Christians cry “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace.² In reality, we are locked in a struggle between two worldviews, that of the Judaeo-Christian worldview and the secularist worldview. The odds are tipped against us, and the consequence of losing this struggle is great.

¹ Jürgen Habermas, "Conversation about God and the World". *Time of transitions* (Cambridge: Polity Press 2006), p. 150-151.

² Jeremiah 6:14 (RSV).

Take for example, the recent European Court of Human Rights decision, *Lautsi v Italy* (2009)³, where the presence of a crucifix in an Italian public school would be regarded as 'disturbing for pupils who practised other religions or were atheists...'⁴ If this principle would be stretched further, then clerical attires of Catholic priests (of which would be immediately associated to Catholicism or Christianity), may prove to be 'offensive' to those who do not profess the same faith.

We must be clear and define what is and what is not offensive. When the definition of offensive is taken to be something subjective and personal, then everyone and everything must go because surely someone somewhere is offended by something or another. A balance must be struck between compelling the public exercise of religion versus driving the practice of religion underground, behind closed doors.

If we Christians remain silent, I would not be surprised that it would come to this; where Europe would be uprooted from its religious and cultural foundations. If it comes to this, the question would not be whether Christianity can inspire global culture, but rather whether or not Christianity would survive.

Furthermore, 'The Court was unable to grasp how the display, in classrooms in State schools, of a symbol that could reasonably be associated with Catholicism (the majority religion in Italy) could serve the educational pluralism that was essential to the preservation of a "democratic society"⁵. This proposition seems to assume that for a democratic state to function properly, it must be free from any form of religious exclusivism. In other words, the 'democratic society' should be governed not by any one religion, but by pure reason.

The error of the court here was to equate religious exclusivism with a positivist interventionism of exclusion. Instead of balancing the crucifix with a Muslim or Buddhist symbol, as would be expected in a multi cultural and multi religious environment where tolerance and harmony is to be inculcated, the opposite, of excluding all religious symbols occurred instead, thereby creating a moral vacuum.

However, in the not so distant past, we may recall atrocities committed by atheistic regime often inspired by communist ideology. These regimes went on the offensive to erase the religious conscience of the people and so created a moral vacuum in which atrocities were able to be committed, free from the restraining influence of morality proposed by religion. A clear example can be seen in the Khmer Rouge regime of Pol Pot in Cambodia. Where in the name of communism, in the name of a utopian vision without God, 'approximately 1.7 million people lost their lives (21% of the country's population)⁶ through the Cambodia Genocide Programme of 1975 to 1979.

Not so long ago, 'on July 18, 2007, Cambodian and international co-prosecutors at the newly established mixed UN/Cambodian tribunal in Phnom Penh found evidence of "crimes against humanity, genocide, grave breaches of the Geneva Convention, homicide, torture and religious persecution."⁷ This is merely one of the many examples that I can cite of the atrocities

³ (application no. 30814/06)

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<<http://cmiskp.echr.coe.int/tkp197/view.asp?action=html&documentId=857732&portal=hbkm&source=externalbydocnumber&table=F69A27FD8FB86142BF01C1166DEA398649>>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ "[The Cambodian Genocide Program](#)", Genocide Studies Program, Yale University. (1994-2008)

⁷ Ibid.

committed by atheistic communist states. Other examples that come to mind include China's Great Leap forward, resulting in the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, Stalin's purges and the Nazi Holocaust of the Jews.

And if the idea of a democratic state (influenced by secularist principles) is moving towards the goal of a public realm devoid of God, are we at the verge of seeing history repeat itself? Or rather would we as Christians allow such atrocities to be repeated? Let us not forget the sayings of George Santayana, that 'those who do not remember the past are condemned to relive it.' Should pre-emptive measures on our part be taken to prevent it from going so far? What then would be those measures? In short, what would be our role as Christians in the world which is increasingly dominated by secularist thought?

The basic vision that is presented before man are the two alternatives that we are faced with. On one hand, the vision of an atheistic and militant secularism. It proposes a future without roots, an outlook without hope. The past and cultural identity of all nations is built on religion, from the Latin term *religare*, which bound the consciousness and character of the people together. And it was through religion that man transcended his current condition, his struggles and difficulties and looked forward, beyond himself, towards hope. Religion gave hope, hope for a better future, and hope for justice and fulfilment. It was through this hope, inspired by religion that man built a better society, based on righteousness and integrity and altruism to make present on this earth, the utopia that his belief taught him would come one day. Religion gave man hope.

Pure secularism, in its atheistic form promises a future devoid of hope and puts in its place an expectation of impending despair. For regardless of his dreams and visions, despite his great achievements and accomplishments, man's destiny ends at death and his triumphs and attainments cease with his last breath. That's it. With no hope of a life beyond death, no hope of future redemption and salvation, how then can we inspire people to look beyond themselves, beyond hedonism and self gratification, beyond narcissism, egoism and self absorption? How can the progress of man and the betterment of mankind come into being when all men care about is themselves for they are the be all and end all of their existence?

The challenge before Christians is to articulate and present before the public of consumers, these disparate visions, of hope and of despair.

Before examining the steps that can be taken by Christians, one must first identify the flaws of in the distorted version of secularism. If there be no flaws, then there would be no need for a remedy. We would need to address the problems which are inherent in the current trend of secular thought. When I speak of flaws, it is to be read in the context of how secularism fails to further true progress for humanity. What then is true progress? How should we define the term 'progresses?'

If the term 'progress' is to be narrowly construed in the economic or technological sense, then secular thought has done well indeed. The world that we are living is a testimony to this proposition. But should economic prosperity and technological advances be the only criteria in measuring human progress? It was noted by the then, Cardinal Ratzinger, that Arnold Toynbee 'emphasised the difference between technological-material progress and true progress, which he defined as spiritualisation.'⁸

⁸ Joseph Ratzinger & Marcello Pera, *Without Roots* (Basic Books: 2006), p. 67.

Toynbee recognised that the West is undergoing a crisis of secularism; that the western world has abandoned 'religion for the cult of technology, nationalism and militarism.'⁹ These goals often pursued by nation states, are amoral in nature. They are neither good nor evil by themselves. However, if these goals are not founded upon spiritual roots, then more often than not technology, nationalism & militarism would serve as instruments of evil.

My point can be illustrated in the National Socialist German Worker's Party, headed by Adolf Hitler, who ruled as a dictator over Germany from 1933 to 1945. The Nazi party embraced ultra-nationalism, the supremacy of the Aryan race, the German people. This ultra-nationalistic approach led to the need of Lebensraum, 'living space' for the needs of Germany.

Such an ideology coupled with the restoration of Germany's military might (influenced by militarism), led to the invasion of Poland in 1939, which plunged most of Europe into war. Thus, the Second World War began and was motivated by nationalistic principles which were void of religion. Its consequences will be the loss of millions of innocent lives.

It should be noted that this sort of nationalism is to be distinguished from patriotism. Such a form of nationalism is to be denounced, whereas patriotism is praiseworthy. For nationalism, as can be seen during the Nazi regime, serves only the interests of one's own nation; whereas, patriotism is a more extensive love, not only for one's own country but also towards other nations as well. This point has been emphasised by Pope John Paul II, as he noted that '... nationalism involves recognising and pursuing the good of one's own nation alone, without regard for the rights of others, patriotism, on the other hand, is a love for one's native land that accords rights to all other nations equal to those claimed for one's own. Patriotism, in other words, leads to a properly ordered social love.'¹⁰

This 'social love' mentioned by the Holy Father is crucial for the survival of Europe, if not the world. It is rooted in the command of Christ that 'you shall love your neighbour as yourself.'¹¹ With the advancement of nuclear technology, humanity cannot afford another global-scale war. The survival of humankind cannot be achieved through vague and subjective ideals of love and peace, but through Jesus Christ, who is God, who is the 'Prince of Peace'¹² and the ultimate expression of love; 'for God is Love'¹³

Only this objective and immanent form of love can sustain an amicable relationship between nations. If the term 'love' loses its objectivity which is rooted in God, then it leaves men to dictate what it means by 'love'. This would be an extreme danger, for without a transcendent law of love, the love of men often degenerates to self-love.

Patriotism is also linked to the Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue as well: 'Honour your father and your mother.'¹⁴ To understand the connection, a short discussion on the etymology of the word 'patriotism' is required. The word 'patriotism' originated from the Latin word '*patriota*' which means 'fellow countryman' and from the Greek word '*patris*' which means 'fatherland'. Therefore, one's native land is, in a sense, a spiritual father to his citizens.

⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Memory & Identity* (Orion Publishing Group: 2005), p. 75.

¹¹ Matthew 22:39.

¹² Isaiah 9:6.

¹³ 1 John 4:8.

¹⁴ Exodus 20:12.

Patriotism can now be understood as a sort of veneration towards one's 'fatherland'. It is '... a love for everything to do with our native land: its history, its traditions, its language, its natural features,' and 'every danger which threatens the overall good of our native land becomes and occasion to demonstrate this love.'¹⁵ Thus, patriotism is rooted in this command of love, if detached from it dire consequences would follow (as can be seen in the atrocities committed by certain nations of the 20th century).

With the example given above, we may safely conclude that the benchmark of progress cannot be judged by mere economic or technological standards. The progress of civilisations should instead be judged by whether or not these states are deeply rooted in morality. This would then beg the question of whether morality should be based upon an objective standard or should it be governed by general consensus?

Secularism would adopt the latter. It does not disregard morality, but asserts that the definition of what is moral is determined by consensus, rather than an objective moral reality. If moral values are dependent upon the consensus of the majority, then it would imply that might is right; might is law. What is moral hinges only upon whether one would have the capability to enforce it. If consensus determines morality, then it would never form a genuine democracy.

Instead a 'mobocracy' would arise, a rule by the mob, where ideals like justice and fairness, are determined by the majority and imposed upon a, perhaps, unwilling minority. We should then be reminded of the words of Socrates, that 'we must not regard what the many say of us, but what he, the one man who has understanding of just and unjust, will say, and what the truth will say. And therefore you begin in error when you suggest that we should regard the opinion of the many about just and unjust, good and evil, honourable, and dishonourable.'¹⁶

This statement explains that the subjective opinions of men (no matter whether there is general consensus or not) on what is moral, cannot trump the objective truth of morality. How do we come to this truth, may be an issue, but would be discussed subsequently. I would first turn my attention to the impetus behind this idea of consensus or secular morality. It is moral relativism that fuels this idea. Moral relativism is directly opposed to the proposition of the existence of an objective moral reality.

One form of relativism asserts that 'what one community holds to be true, beautiful and good is only so according to the criteria by which that community defines them... There are no meta-criteria that can establish intrinsic truth, absolute beauty or universal good.'¹⁷ Perhaps this proposition on moral relativism is well-intentioned. As we live in an increasingly pluralistic society, in order to avoid a clash of values amongst various cultures, the modern world has resorted to relegate claims of 'the' truth of morality (an objective reality) into 'a' truth (subjective opinions).

Moral values involve 'ought' propositions, i.e. what ought to be done, and what ought not to be done. These 'ought' propositions are based upon what is morally right and wrong. For example, if an act is morally wrong, it ought not to be done. The 'ought' propositions flow from an objective reality of moral rightness or wrongness.

In this increasingly secularistic world, moral values have been reduced to value-opinions. But should moral values be confused with opinions? An opinion is defined as 'a view or

¹⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Memory & Identity* (Orion Publishing Group: 2005), p. 73-74,

¹⁶ Plato, *The Trial and Death of Socrates* (Dover Publications: 1992), p. 48.

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger & Marcello Pera, *Without Roots* (Basic Books: 2006), p. 12-13.

judgement not necessarily based on fact or knowledge.¹⁸ In other words, an opinion is referential in nature; it refers to something other than itself. If values are mere opinions, what is its referent? Value-opinions may be defined as opinions on what is right and wrong. But if an objective moral reality is rejected, it would follow that what is right and wrong is also based upon mere opinions.

With this flow of thought in mind, value-opinions would be more accurately defined as opinions of opinions on what is morally right and wrong (which in turn are also opinions). This leads to an infinite regress of which the referent is nowhere in sight. The reduction of objective values to mere value-opinions, as noted by Prof. Kreeft, would be like creating 'a hall of mirrors with nothing in them to reflect.'¹⁹ Thus, to define moral values as mere opinions it would encounter definitional problems.

Relativistic secularists may contend that such an argument against moral relativism would have no practical significance. However, I would beg to differ. For if we are not able to properly define 'moral values', it would show a lack of understanding in its nature. How then, in a practical sense, would laws be legislated if there is a lack of understanding on moral values?

One may also be able to intellectually undermine the proposition of relativism by simply posing this question: Is there such a thing as objective truth? Naturally, a relativist would deny this, by asserting that all truth is subjective. Now, would this proposition that truth is subjective be then an objective truth? Relativists would seem to be trapped in this logical inconsistency.

However, a logical inconsistency would not make much of an impact if relativism be effective in encouraging tolerance. Now the question is would it truly do so?

It would be good to note that even if moral absolutism leads to intolerance, it does not follow that it is false. It is a *non sequitur* argument. This is due to the fact that 'a belief could have bad effects but still be true.'²⁰ The adherence to the truth would be far more beneficial than an adherence to a non-truth which may produce good effects.

With this in mind, I would further assert that having a society firmly rooted in an objective moral reality would not necessarily foster intolerance. For if the reason behind tolerance is due only to the consensus of society and not an objective morality; my main concern would be "what if the consensus of society changes?" Only by regarding tolerance as an objective good would one be able to consistently encourage tolerance. Christianity forms the immovable base upon which tolerance is built. Here, I would give the example of the virtue of mercy, of which all Christians are called to practice – 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.'²¹

Through mercy, we are encouraged to "hate the sin, but love the sinner." This is true tolerance, that one may not approve of what has been done, but would still be willing to stretch out his hand in mercy, knowing that wrongs may have been committed through human frailty. This is expressed in the Lord's Prayer, 'et dimitte nobis debita nostra, Sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris – forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors,'²² where we know mercy must be given, for mercy has been shown upon us.

¹⁸ http://www.askoxford.com/concise_oed/opinion?view=uk

¹⁹ Peter Kreeft, *A Refutation of Moral Relativism* (Ignatius Press: 1999), p. 83.

²⁰ Peter Kreeft, *A Refutation of Moral Relativism* (Ignatius Press: 1999), p. 96.

²¹ Matthew 5:7.

²² Matthew 6:12.

One must note, however, that mercy is not sentimentalism, i.e. the mere subjective attitude of disregarding one's wrong (like how some mothers would defend their child even if he has committed the most atrocious of crimes). Mercy, contrary to this, must be accompanied with the prerequisite of justice. This was noted by Prof. Kreeft as well, that 'the convicted murderer deserves to die, any consideration of capital punishment that does not begin there, with justice and the objective moral law and the rightness of punishment that fits the crime, any philosophy that refuses the truth in "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth", is sentimentalism... Justice is the precondition for mercy. But once justice is admitted, we are free to be merciful... Once we admit the justice of capital punishment or of defensive war, we can move ahead to seek better alternatives.'²³

This, I believe, would be the basis of tolerance. That one must first set aside how he feels about a particular act that has been done (for what is morally right or wrong cannot be judged by mere sentiments), but fall back upon an objective morality (of which is free from any subjective attitude). Only after going through this deliberative phase based on objective moral values, would an objective and sound judgement be produced. At this juncture, we have arrived at the executive phase, i.e. what should be done next after ascertaining the moral rightness or wrongness of an act? Christianity, at this stage, would plea for mercy. Only in this manner would one be able to truly exercise the value of tolerance.

On the contrary, relativism which appeals a sort of emotivism, where moral values are only as real as how one feels about them, '... cannot appeal to moral law as a wall, a dam against intolerance. But we need a dam because societies are fickle, like individuals. What else can deter a Germany – a humane and humanistic Germany in the twenties – from turning into an inhumane and inhuman Nazi philosophy in the thirties? What else can stop a now tolerant America from some future intolerance? – against any group it decides to oppress? It was Blacks in the Southeast over slavery last century; it may be Hispanics in the Southwest over immigration next century. We're intolerant to unwanted babies today [abortion]; we'll start killing born ones tomorrow.'²⁴ Thus, a refusal to appeal to a transcendent moral law would not guarantee tolerance or the protection of the rights of citizens.

I would argue that relativism leads to disillusionment as well. Where society would have no objective values to hinge upon, it places itself in a vulnerable position to turn into a state rule by a dictator. For if nothing is absolute, it may be said that it would be legitimate for one to rely upon political power to impose one's views upon others.

Furthermore, the term 'democracy' cannot be reduced by relativism into a mere democratic process which disregards the objective moral reality. A true democracy is much more than that. If it is not instilled with objective values, it would not serve to protect the liberty of individuals. This would then run contrary to the essence of a democracy itself. Let us not forget that Adolf Hitler himself was legitimately elected into office. 'It was a regularly elected parliament that consented to Hitler's rise to power in Germany in the 1930s. And the same Reichstag, by delegating full powers to Hitler (Ermächtigungsgesetz), paved the way for his policy of invading Europe, for the establishment of concentration camps, and for the implementation of the so called "final solution" to the Jewish question, that is to say the elimination of millions of the sons and daughters of Israel.'²⁵

²³ Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue* (Ignatius Press: 1992) p. 117-118.

²⁴ Peter Kreeft, *A Refutation of Moral Relativism* (Ignatius Press: 1999), p. 98.

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Memory & Identity* (Orion Publishing Group: 2005), p. 151.

For as contended by Alcide de Gasperi, former Prime Minister of Italy, that 'it was only through the political acceptance of Catholic Natural Law... that man has any legitimate, defensible, absolute, God-given rights. Without that, with only the pagan worship of the state, men's rights were completely dependent on the whim of the duces or other who claimed to embody the popular will.'²⁶ There are no absolutes in a relativistic worldview. If this is so, as a consequence, there will be no absolute rights as well. If individuals do not have absolute rights, but have only rights which are contingent upon the whim of the state, then how can there be a genuine protection of the liberty of men?

If laws do not derive its authority from an unchanging moral source, then what would it be based upon? 'Secularists must beware... of rushing to transform their whims into desires, and their desires into rights.'²⁷ Should laws be enacted on the basis of the sentiments of the legislators? If so, would it ensure the protection of the rights of citizens of which is the primary purpose of a democracy? The answer to both these questions would be a negative.

If rights were based on the whim of the state, it places individuals in a vulnerable position; of which their rights are only guaranteed for as long as they remain in the favour of the state. Take for example the Nuremberg Laws on Citizenship and Race (September 15, 1935) and the Supplementary Decree of November 14, 1935 which expunged the political rights of citizens of Jewish origins in Nazi Germany. Article 4(1) of the Supplementary decree provides that 'A Jew cannot be a citizen of the Reich. He cannot exercise the right to vote; he cannot hold public office.'²⁸ Such laws of ethnic discrimination were based on nothing but the Fuhrer's anti-Semitic views. This would certainly not be a secure foundation on which the law should be based upon.

May these words of Benito Mussolini serve as a warning to those who propagate relativistic theories: 'Everything I have said and done in these last years is relativism, by intuition. From the fact that all ideologies are of equal value, that all ideologies are mere fictions, the modern relativist infers that everybody has the right to create for himself his own ideology, and to attempt to enforce it with all the energy of which he is capable. If relativism signifies contempt for fixed categories, and men who claim to be the bearers of an objective immortal truth, then there is nothing more relativistic than fascism.'²⁹

The state regulates social behaviour (fact), but this should never be separated from the purpose of social regulation (value). The regulation of social behaviour may only be justified if it be grounded upon an objective moral reality. The State ought to be paternalistic, not dictatorial. And it has been noted by Pera that 'the modern democratic and social state is especially paternalistic and moral. In its desires to care for its citizens, it must necessarily adopt and safeguard within its own public sphere many values that are widespread in the private sphere of individuals, groups, or categories.'³⁰

It has been commonly thought that the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity were the offspring of the Enlightenment. This would only be partially correct. In a sense, the Enlightenment, in spite of being the impetus behind the horror of the French Revolution, has reminded mankind of these ideals. A practical manifestation of these ideals can be seen in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen, which was a product of the French Revolution.

²⁶ H. W. Crocker III, *Triumph: The Power and the Glory of the Catholic Church* (Three Rivers Press: 2001), p. 409.

²⁷ Joseph Ratzinger & Marcello Pera, *Without Roots* (Basic Books: 2006), p. 100.

²⁸ <http://frank.mtsu.edu/~baustin/nurmlaw2.html>

²⁹ Diuturna [The Lasting] (1921) as quoted in H. B. Veatch, *Rational Man : A Modern Interpretation of Aristotelian Ethics* (1962).

³⁰ Joseph Ratzinger & Marcello Pera, *Without Roots* (Basic Books: 2006), p. 96-97.

The declaration begins by noting that ‘the ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole cause of public calamities and of the corruption of governments’³¹. In response to this, certain ‘natural, unalienable, and sacred rights of man’³² were declared and made clear.

However, it should be clearly known that the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity was re-introduced through the influence of the Enlightenment philosophers, but were not discovered by them per se; for the establishment of the rights of man upon these ideals was already rooted in the Gospel. For ‘Christ himself speaks of them repeatedly, for example when he says in the Gospel that “the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27). With these words, he authoritatively asserts man’s higher dignity, definitively indicating the divine foundation of human rights,’³³ as noted by Pope John Paul II.

The Enlightenment, however, by advocating that reason is the primary source of legitimacy and authority, denies that these rights are founded upon a divine authority. The question would be: whether human rights with reason as its foundation be an effective bulwark against the infringement of rights? For the end of declaring these rights is towards the protection of such inalienable rights. It is true that reason is a valuable aid in the search of truth, in our context, the truth of human rights. But I am of the opinion, that reason by itself is insufficient to guarantee the protection of the rights of man.

This is due to the fact that reason stems from the human mind. And since the human mind is fallible (of which no reasonable man would deny), the use of reason by it would consequently be fallible as well. How could the protection of human rights, of which is of utmost importance to the welfare of man be based on the fallibility of the human mind? If human rights are built upon fallible reason alone, it portrays a sense of instability or fragility; in a sense that rights are as malleable as the human mind. But for rights to be universal and inalienable (of which is necessary to guarantee indiscriminate protection of the rights of man), it must precisely be unchanging or non-malleable. Thus, rights cannot be based on reason alone.

The fallibility of reason can also be seen in a theological context, where the ‘blindness of pride deceived our first parents into thinking themselves sovereign and autonomous, and into thinking that they could ignore the knowledge which comes from God. All men and women were caught up in this primal disobedience which so wounded reason that from then on its path to full truth would be strewn with obstacles. From that time onwards, the human capacity to know the truth was impaired by an aversion to the One who is the source and origin of truth. It is again the Apostle who reveals just how far human thinking, because of sin, became “empty”, and human reasoning became distorted and inclined to falsehood (cf. Rom 1:21-22). The eyes of the mind were no longer able to see clearly: reason became more and more a prisoner to itself. The coming of Christ was the saving event which redeemed reason from its weakness, setting it free from the shackles in which it had imprisoned itself.’³⁴

With these words of the His Holiness, we know that it is Christ that has redeemed reason from its fallen state. It is faith in Him coupled with reason, that would lead us to the understanding of truth, even the truth of the dignity of man and the rights that flow from this dignity. Reason may be fickle, but faith in God who is eternal and immutable would be the proper anchor on which all rights should be founded upon. The Christian faith perfects reason, for ‘what human reason seeks

³¹ <http://www.hrcr.org/docs/frenchdec.html>

³² Ibid.

³³ Pope John Paul II, *Memory & Identity* (Orion Publishing Group: 2005), p. 122.

³⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (reproduced by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: 1998), p. 35.

“without knowing it” (cf. Acts 17:23) can be found only through Christ: what is revealed by him is “the full truth” (cf. Jn 1:14-16) of everything which was created in him and through him and which therefore in him finds its fulfilment (cf. Col 1:17).³⁵ A society built upon reason alone, cut off from God would not be able to achieve true progress. A society detached from God would be like a branch cut off from the vine; it would eventually die off. For ‘As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me [Christ].’³⁶

Rights are based upon the dignity of a human person, and this ‘dignity proper to man... is based not simply on human nature but even more on the fact that, in Jesus Christ God truly became man.’³⁷

Now, one may raise the question: how would the proposition above be of any benefit to a non-believer?

I would argue that even the Christian concept of God would be of much good to a non-believer in terms of the protection of his or her rights. For one of the characteristics of the Christian God would be immutability. The Christian God is immutable; as a consequence, His will would be unchanging. It would then follow that the moral laws (with regards to how one should treat another fellow human being) prescribed by Him are also unchanging. Thus, the rights of man are objective and unchanging. If it be unchanging, then the rights of man are not subjected to the manipulation of any one person or body. This acceptance of a transcendent and unchanging moral law would then (as noted above) ensure the protection of rights in a more consistent fashion.

What then of the concept of freedom? Freedom seems to be an important (if not the most important) goal of liberal democracies. For the word ‘liberal’ is rooted in the Latin word ‘liber’, this in a literal sense would mean ‘free man’. In other words, freedom and democracy is interconnected. If this be so, is the modern conception of what it means by freedom mistaken? Though we would engage in a theoretical discussion on how freedom is perceived by the modern man, one should not underestimate the value of such a discussion. This is due to the fact that one’s understanding of the concept of freedom (or for any other concept for that matter) may affect his actions. For example, if freedom is perceived as a mere license to do whatsoever one pleases, one may act in a manner of which may infringe the freedom of others as well. Furthermore, if this conception of freedom by modern man be mistaken, would Christianity aid in rectifying this misconception?

The best expression of what it means by freedom by the modern world can be seen in the US Supreme Court decision of *Planned Parenthood of South-eastern PA. v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992). In this case, it was noted by Justices O’Connor, Souter and Kennedy that ‘at the heart of liberty [freedom] is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning of the universe and the mystery of human life.’³⁸ Freedom is now associated with subjectivism. Freedom would be man’s choice to define his own worldview and act upon it.

The modern man has stripped freedom of its objective meaning. This would indeed be a mistake with great consequences. For if this is true, what would give us the right to criticise tyrannical regimes, where dictators merely chose to define their existence with a subjective worldview of domination and subservience. Here, I am reminded now of the words in *Paradise*

³⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (reproduced by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Malaysia-Singapore-Brunei: 1998), p. 52.

³⁶ John 15:4.

³⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Memory & Identity* (Orion Publishing Group: 2005), p. 126.

³⁸ <http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/scripts/getcase.pl?court=US&vol=505&invol=833>

Lost, ‘Farewell, remorse: all good to me is lost; Evil, be thou my good.’³⁹ For if freedom means that one is allowed to dictate what is good and evil, then the consequences would be great. Let us not forget Adolf Hitler’s worldview of the supremacy of the Aryan race and the consequences that came after that. For ‘the excess of liberty, whether in States or individuals, seems only to pass into excess of slavery... tyranny naturally arises out of democracy...’⁴⁰

The root problem of this distorted conception of freedom lies in treating freedom as an end in itself. Freedom is not the *summum bonum* of man. Freedom is but only the means to an end, which is goodness. Our free choices are to be directed towards the good of one’s self and one another. The freedom of choice is not the end of all things; for one’s free choices may lead him unto enslavement: ‘if I am free I can make good or bad use of my freedom.’⁴¹ Freedom, if not tempered with morality and reason, may lead to the undoing of one’s own or another’s freedom. We would all agree that if one freely murders another would lead to the deprivation of his own liberty as well as the freedom to live of the victim. With this, we can safely say that freedom can never be an end by itself. Freedom without reason may pass ‘into the harshest and bitterest form of slavery.’⁴²

Christianity reminds us that true freedom is the opportunity for one to choose what is good (in our context: moral good). It is in our freedom that we are able to fulfill the commandment of love given by Jesus Christ: ‘love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’⁴³ and to ‘love your neighbour as yourself’⁴⁴. Freedom is at the service of these moral truths, it is at the service of love. Here, I would like to re-emphasise that a genuine democracy cannot be diluted into a mere democratic process; it must be attached with an objective set of ethical values rooted in love for God and neighbour. For ‘it is this moral code, coming from God and sanctioned in both Old and New Covenants, which is also the intangible basis of all human legislation in any system, particularly a democratic system. The law established by man, by parliaments and by every other human legislator must not contradict the natural law, that is to say, the eternal law of God.’⁴⁵

If this ethical dimension is ignored, then freedom would fall into the service of what would seem pleasurable to man (the principle of utility). Pleasure would then be exalted above the value of the human person; it will be mankind’s new ‘god’. This was noted by the Roman Pontiff, John Paul II that ‘it is often said: what matters is to be free, released from all constraint or limitation, so as to operate according to private judgement, which in reality is pure caprice.’⁴⁶ If our thought upon what is morally right and wrong hinges upon whether pleasurable consequences would follow from a particular, this would do nothing but encourage selfishness.

Such exaltations of pleasure as an end, can be seen in acts of abortion (where the child’s life would be regarded as encroaching upon the mother’s ‘freedom’), euthanasia (where one’s own life is disregarded for the sake of the avoidance of pain, of which is the pursuit of pleasure) and homosexual acts (where unnatural acts are committed for the sake of a distorted form of sexual pleasure). This would encourage a self-centred attitude of which must be discouraged if societies are to live in harmony.

³⁹ Book IV, 1. 108, ‘Paradise Lost’, John Milton

⁴⁰ Plato, *The Republic* (Dover Publications: 2000), p. 223.

⁴¹ Pope John Paul II, *Memory & Identity* (Orion Publishing Group: 2005), p. 37.

⁴² Plato, *The Republic* (Dover Publications: 2000), p. 229.

⁴³ Matthew 22:37.

⁴⁴ Matthew 22:39.

⁴⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Memory & Identity* (Orion Publishing Group: 2005), p. 150-151.

⁴⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Memory & Identity* (Orion Publishing Group: 2005), p. 38.

It is crucial that for our civilisations to survive, we must step out of this pleasure-seeking and selfish mentality. As noted above, with the advancement of nuclear technology, we know what devastation may be caused if weapons of mass destruction would be used without responsibility. And if individuals are self-seeking, the state would naturally reflect this attitude. If this is so, then this self-seeking attitude of a particular state may manifest itself in hostility against other nations; then, a nuclear war may be looming. Thus, we must either love or die. To achieve peace, reciprocal altruism must be adopted among nations.

Finally, it must be noted that being at peace with God is crucial in being at peace with ourselves and our fellowmen. To totally demarcate the state from the Christian faith is to separate society from its source of peace. Peace is the consequence of mutual understanding, how would one be able to understand others if he does not first understand himself? It is in 'Christ alone, through his humanity, reveals the totality of the mystery of man... [And] man cannot understand himself completely with reference to other visible creatures. The key to his self-understanding lies in contemplating the divine Prototype, the Word made flesh, the eternal Son of the Father. The primary and definitive source for studying the intimate nature of the human being is therefore the Most Holy Trinity.'⁴⁷

How then would Christians bring the truth of God to the world? In what way would this alternative Christian worldview be presented to the world? I believe the solution is startlingly simple (though it may be difficult to implement). 'A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'⁴⁸

The world would not be won over by the force of our arguments; no matter how strong they are; for 'being struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ is more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction.'⁴⁹ If Christianity is to inspire global culture, it can only be done through the radical love of Christians in imitation of their Master; we must so the world the beauty of Love Himself. The question would then be: are we willing to stake all to reveal this Love to the world?

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 125.

⁴⁸ John 13:34-35.

⁴⁹ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 'The Feeling of Things, The Contemplation of Beauty' (a message sent to a meeting of the ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation in August 2002).