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HUMAN RIGHTS: Its culture and moral confusions

By Howard Taylor.

Rutherford House.

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Modern societies concentrate enormous power in the institutions of the state and the market. Government and big business project their presence and their authority into every corner of our lives. They bring comfort and convenience to everyday life.

But unrestrained, both the state and the market can unleash enormous destruction on people, property and culture. We restrain this power through the exercise of 'rights'. The right to associate freely with others for a common purpose, to communicate freely within reasonable restraints, or to sell our labour at a fair price, are some of the rights without which life would soon become hideous. Every time we join with fellow believers to praise God, we are exercising rights which are protected in law and custom. It distresses us that these rights are denied to so many around the world.

Even so, some Christians have a problem with the whole idea of 'human rights'. These believers look back to the era of 'Christendom', when society was officially Christian and the rights of citizens were based on their nominal religious affiliation. As Leonard Verduin proved in his great study of 'sacralism', the victims of this system were believers themselves if they took the Bible seriously - the official church, from Augustine to Calvin and into the early American Puritan settlements, had to admit unbelievers and was therefore opposed by those who found a 'mixed' church to be unbiblical. Your Christian forbears suffered for your right to belong to the church of your choice, and so for your neighbour's right to belong or not belong to pretty much anything she chooses.

Howard Taylor is a Church of Scotland minister and lecturer on (it says on the cover) 'Christianity and Science and also Moral philosophy'. *Human Rights - its culture and moral confusions* is either a very short book or a longish pamphlet, depending how you rate 20,000 words comprising nine chapters and an appendix. It amounts to a set of enthusiastically assembled jottings and quotations, many of them interesting but not having much bearing on his extreme claim that 'human rights' are 'an attempt to replace the God of the Bible'.

The Rev. Taylor bases his case on the fact that a 'Real Goodness exists - there is also a Real Morality'. Of course, this is sound Christianity. It is also true that human rights confer equality to all, whether they live in accordance with the Real Morality, another morality, or no morality at all. Mr. Taylor thinks this is a contradiction, and if you agree, you are entitled to argue his case. But may I suggest that you (unlike Howard Taylor) first read some contemporary philosophy, such as John Rawls on rights, Jurgen Habermas on communication, or Michael Walzer on justice. You can then debate the thinking behind separating 'rights' from 'goodness', which is basically that goodness is not something that can be imposed by the state, and that such imposition usually ends up as the enemy of goodness. (You may spot some common features here with New Testament teaching on law and salvation.)

Of course, there are essential debates about where to strike the balance between liberty and order, and how to maintain a public morality in a multi-cultural, democratic society. It is important for the Christian voice to be heard. But Christians need to think very carefully before signing up for

the 'religious Right' whose US triumph is yet to be replicated here. Already a British right-wing think-tank is publishing American material calling for a 'Human Rights Act (Revised)' giving 'every individual or group' the right to 'discriminate for or against any other group or individual for whatever reasons they see fit'. Anyone aware of 20th-century European history knows how threatening this is.

Lenin had a term for naive intellectuals who justified oppression and terror in the Soviet state - he called them his 'useful idiots'. Christians must beware of becoming the 'useful idiots' of those whose real aim is to destroy democracy.