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HUMAN DIGNITY COMES BEFORE VALUES

Today, throughout the world, there are numerous discussions on “values,” and many Christians believe values to be what is most important. But are values really the central point of orientation for Christians in matters concerning human life?

There are many calls to preserve inherited cultural values; they bind people together and seem to assure peace and harmony. It is assumed that common laws and political institutions by themselves cannot do so. Yet, this emphasis on values is highly ambiguous. While good intentions underlie the values upheld by different cultures and religions, human beings whose way of life does not fit within a particular set of values are often discriminated against, even persecuted and expelled from a community for the sake of preserving those very values. Militant extremists often defend certain values which they consider absolute, and in fighting for what they consider to be “good” values, actually do evil.

Some churches call for the upholding of “traditional Christian values” that are presumed to be shared by all Christians, if not also by those of other faiths. These are set over and against what is seen as a secularized world that has lost these values. The values of secular humanism such as human dignity, human rights and tolerance, which for the most part were developed during the Enlightenment, are dis-

tinguished from enduring Christian values such as love of neighbor, compassion and mercy. And many Christians would add to them some further absolute values, particularly related to procreation and the preservation of human life.

What is often not recognized is the way in which a certain value is evaluated or weighted can increase or decrease, especially in relation to competing values that may be at stake in a given situation. This should make us suspicious of using the concept of values as a central point for Christian anthropology and ethics. For example, on the basis of the inviolable value of human life, some oppose the use of human zygotes for research, or abortion, but at the same time might favor the death penalty or a just war. Furthermore, upholding the absoluteness of a certain value can be at the cost of being insensitive to particular needs or challenges people are facing in their lives. Jesus and his disciples were plucking ears of corn on the Sabbath, and were challenged by critics for whom the Sabbath was the primary value. Jesus answered, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mk 2:27).

Recently Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, put human dignity rather than Christian values at the center of his considerations. Speaking at a Christian-Muslim forum, he believes the church’s main contribution in pluralistic societies to be

that it declares that, in virtue of everyone’s primordial relation to God (made in God’s image), the dignity of every person is non-negotiable: each has a unique gift to give, each is owed respect and patience and the freedom to contribute what is given them.¹

This is illustrated with examples of situations where this dignity is doubted. At a time when Britain lives in fear of terrorist attacks, he maintains that the dignity of persons does not justify the use of torture to gain information, even in extreme situations. We might add that the dignity not only of a suspected but also a convicted terrorist needs to be respected.

From a Christian ethical perspective, what is central is not a set of abstract values but being sensitive to the lives of actual human be-

ings. In this sense, human dignity cannot be relativized or compromised by any value—it is a category of its own. Human dignity cannot be decreased or increased in value. Instead, other persons and their ways of life must be respected.

The way in which human dignity can be relativized by a given set of values is illustrated by a recent speech given by Alexy II, Patriarch of the Orthodox Church of Moscow and all Russia, at the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Although he began by putting dignity at the center, he maintained that a certain morality is necessary to preserve human dignity and to realize human rights, through which human dignity is given legal standing. Otherwise, there will be a break between human rights and morality. In his view, human rights are often used today to justify immoral behavior.

His is a position shared by many Christians, as well as those of other religions. Because it is based on a strong critique of what has come out of the Enlightenment, it is worth noting that it actually stands in the tradition of Enlightenment moral philosophy, in emphasizing a close relation between morality and freedom. Morality is freedom in action.

From a theological perspective, Alexy II's position is problematic. Lutherans are bound to become suspicious when reading that "Christianity has always stressed that if [a] human being lives a moral li[f]e he or she may become God's friend (*cf.* Jn 15:15) and achieve freedom (*cf.* Jn 8:32)"² The hope of living according to the divine law and Christian values is that one will become God's friend. Similar to Alexy II, Thomas Aquinas also maintained that following the natural law of the Old Testament—which also follows from human reason—is what makes human beings "good," and consequently friends of God.

From a Lutheran point of view, it is theologically problematic when morality becomes a requirement for God's friendship and salvation. Does morality really lead to God and help us to become God's friends? And does it really lead to freedom in a religious sense?

In John 8:32, we read that truth alone—and not morality—is what sets us free, and that truth is Jesus Christ. As Martin Luther argues

in the Heidelberg Disputation, “The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it”³ This insight is at the very center of the doctrine of justification. Human beings become God’s friends, not because they can work for it, but because God comes to them in Jesus Christ and makes them his friends—despite their being sinners. This is what theologically grounds human dignity.

Because of this christological basis for dignity, questions of morality and values, although still important, are subordinated to what is primary for Christian anthropology and ethics. Consequently, human dignity can not be relativized by morality and its values. Rather, it is the other way round: all morality and values are relativized by insisting on each human being’s dignity, with sensitivity towards each person’s life situation. No new hierarchy of values can be deduced on the basis of human dignity. The insistence on human dignity—as grounded in faith in Jesus Christ—puts limits on how others can be judged or excluded on the basis of any set of values.

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You are encouraged to share your perspectives on this topic with Rev. Dr Hans-Peter Grosshans at hpg@lutheranworld.org

NOTES

¹http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/sermons_speeches/070910.htm

²http://www.coe.int/t/dc/files/pa_session/sept_2007/20071002_disc_patriarche_en.asp

³Helmut T. Lehmann (ed.), *Luther’s Works*, vol 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), p. 41.

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