



THEOLOGY AND HUMAN RIGHTS: INTERSECTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL

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Abstract: *The relationship between theology and human rights remains one of the most debated topics in global academic and sociopolitical discourse. While some view theological frameworks as inherently conflicting with secular human rights paradigms, others argue that religious doctrines provide essential moral foundations for promoting justice, dignity, and equality. This article explores the intersections of theology and human rights across historical, philosophical, and cultural dimensions. It examines how theological narratives have influenced contemporary human rights movements, the tensions between divine command and universal moral law, and the implications for policy and interfaith collaboration. Emphasis is placed on Islamic theology in the context of global human rights discourses, with insights drawn from Pakistan's pluralistic society. The study concludes by advocating for constructive theological engagement that upholds human dignity and fosters inclusive interpretations aligned with modern rights frameworks.*

INTRODUCTION:

The discourse on human rights has largely been shaped by secular Enlightenment ideals. However, the theological underpinnings of justice, compassion, and human dignity predate modern declarations of rights. Religions such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and others have historically laid ethical foundations that resonate with contemporary human rights ideals. Nonetheless, tensions arise when theological doctrines are perceived to contradict or restrict certain rights, especially those related to gender, religious freedom, and governance. In the Muslim world, particularly in Pakistan, these tensions are evident in the legal system, civil society debates, and academic reflections. This paper explores these intersections and highlights the evolving relationship between theology and human rights through global and regional lenses.

1. Historical Foundations of Human Rights in Religious Thought

Early Theological Conceptions of Justice and Dignity

The concept of human rights, often perceived as a modern secular development, finds deep roots in the theological traditions of the Abrahamic religions. Ancient religious texts and theological doctrines laid foundational ethical principles concerning human dignity, equality, and justice — principles later formalized into what are now recognized as human rights.

In **Christian theology**, the doctrine of *Imago Dei* (Genesis 1:27) — the belief that all humans are created in the image of God — asserts the inherent worth of every person. This idea became pivotal in Christian ethics, suggesting that all human life carries divine value and deserves protection and respect (Glendon, 2001)[7].

Similarly, **Islamic theology** emphasizes the sanctity and honor bestowed upon humanity by God. The Qur'an declares, "Indeed, We have honored the children of Adam..." (Quran 17:70), affirming a divine endorsement of human dignity. Further, Islamic legal maxims (*Qawaid Fiqhiyyah*) such as *La darar wa la dirar* (do no harm) reflect concern for personal and collective wellbeing — a fundamental component of human rights (Kamali, 1998)[13].

In **Judaism**, the Torah repeatedly commands justice and equitable treatment of all people, including non-Israelites. Verses such as Leviticus 19:33–34 instruct the Israelites to treat strangers as native-born citizens, emphasizing empathy and equality. The rabbinic tradition further developed ideas of social justice, care for the vulnerable, and ethical responsibility.

These early religious notions illustrate that theology, rather than being a peripheral influence, has been central to the evolution of moral reasoning around human dignity and justice.

Comparative Analysis of Religious Scriptures

A thematic comparison across Abrahamic scriptures reveals notable convergence on key moral imperatives:

- **Justice** is a central command:
 - "What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy..." (Micah 6:8) – Christianity
 - "O you who believe! Stand out firmly for justice..." (Quran 4:135) – Islam
 - "Justice, justice you shall pursue..." (Deuteronomy 16:20) – Judaism
- **Freedom and Liberation:**
 - The **Exodus** story represents divine intervention to free the oppressed — a recurring motif in Jewish and Christian theology.
 - The Qur'an presents stories of Moses and Pharaoh as lessons in resisting tyranny and advocating justice.

These scriptural values were not abstract principles but translated into social responsibilities: care for the poor, protection of orphans and widows, fair treatment of laborers, and resistance to oppression.

The Role of Religious Reformers in Advocating Proto-Human Rights

Throughout history, religious leaders and theologians have invoked scripture and moral theology to promote social justice and resist oppressive systems — often before secular human rights frameworks were formalized.

- **Prophets and mystics** in all traditions called for equity, mercy, and reform. The Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) Farewell Sermon famously emphasized equality among people and condemned racial and tribal superiority (Mayer, 1999)[5].
- **Christian reformers** like **William Wilberforce** used theological arguments to campaign against slavery, while **Martin Luther King Jr.** explicitly grounded his civil rights activism in Christian moral teachings (Hollenbach, 2003)[4].
- **Islamic thinkers** like **Jamal al-Din al-Afghani** and **Muhammad Iqbal** emphasized the compatibility of Islam with liberty, social justice, and individual rights, particularly in the context of colonial resistance and postcolonial state formation (Nasr, 2002)[8].

These reformers viewed theological traditions as sources of empowerment, not repression — underscoring that sacred texts, when interpreted progressively, could champion human dignity and justice.

This historical-theological grounding challenges the misconception that human rights are solely products of modernity. Instead, it affirms that theology has long offered moral and ethical blueprints for respecting and upholding human dignity, social justice, and equality — forming a vital part of the human rights discourse.

2. Theological Justifications for Human Rights

Divine Dignity of Human Beings in Islamic and Christian Thought

Theological traditions have long posited that human beings possess intrinsic worth, rooted in their divine origin. In **Islam**, the Qur'an articulates that "We have certainly honored the children of Adam..." (Qur'an 17:70), emphasizing that human dignity is divinely ordained and not contingent upon race, gender, or status (Sachedina, 2009)[6]. This foundational idea permeates Islamic ethics and legal theory, where the protection of life (nafs), intellect ('aql), and dignity ('ird) are among the essential objectives of Islamic law (maqasid al-shari'ah) (Kamali, 1998)[13].

In **Christianity**, the concept of Imago Dei (Genesis 1:27), which holds that humans are created in the image of God, forms the theological basis for universal dignity and equality. It mandates moral responsibilities and elevates each individual as a moral agent deserving respect. The teachings of Jesus, particularly in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), advocate mercy, peacemaking, and love of neighbor — values that resonate closely with modern human rights (Hollenbach, 2003)[4].

Moral Universals in Theology vs. Secular Ethics

The secular discourse on human rights, influenced by Enlightenment rationalism, posits that human dignity arises from reason and autonomy. In contrast, theological traditions assert that dignity is divinely given and immutable. Despite different ontological foundations, both systems often converge on similar moral imperatives.

For example:

- **Secular ethics** derive freedom of belief from autonomy.
- **Religious ethics**, especially in Islam and Christianity, protect freedom of conscience as a divine gift (la ikraha fid-din – "There is no compulsion in religion," Qur'an 2:256).

This convergence indicates the possibility of shared “moral universals” — principles such as justice, compassion, and the sanctity of life — that transcend the divide between secular and religious worldviews (An-Na'im, 2008)[1].

However, divergence emerges in certain contested domains, such as gender roles and sexuality, where conservative theological interpretations may appear restrictive compared to liberal human rights frameworks. These tensions necessitate contextual and hermeneutic engagement with scriptures to find compatibility (Esack, 2006)[3].

Religious Support for Social Justice, Peace, and Equality

Religious traditions have not only theorized justice and dignity but have also historically inspired movements for social transformation. Across centuries and cultures, religious communities have led initiatives to combat slavery, colonialism, racial injustice, and poverty:

- In **Christian thought**, the prophetic tradition of advocating for the poor and oppressed finds expression in liberation theology, which views the Gospel through the lens of social justice, particularly in Latin America (Glendon, 2001)[7].
- In **Islam**, the concept of *adl* (justice) and *ihsan* (benevolence) are not optional virtues but divine imperatives. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized equality and justice in his farewell sermon and established principles of rights for women, orphans, and minorities (Mayer, 1999)[5].
- The **Jewish tradition** also emphasizes *tikkun olam* — "repairing the world" — as a religious obligation to establish a just and compassionate society (Bielefeldt, 2000)[9].

These theological imperatives translate into practical advocacy:

- Faith-based organizations often serve as first responders in humanitarian crises.
- Religious leaders frequently speak out against systemic injustice, genocide, and environmental degradation.

Theologians argue that this religious motivation is not only compatible with human rights but can reinforce its moral force and legitimacy among faith-based communities.

While the justifications for human rights in theology and secularism may emerge from different sources — divine command vs. human reason — their moral convergence offers a rich foundation for collaboration. Religious traditions, when interpreted in their universalistic and justice-oriented dimensions, provide not only legitimacy but also enduring commitment to the principles of human rights.

3. Points of Tension: When Theology Conflicts with Modern Rights

Religious Doctrines vs. Gender Equality and LGBTQ+ Rights

Despite areas of convergence between theological ethics and human rights, certain domains reveal sharp tensions, particularly regarding **gender equality** and **LGBTQ+ rights**. Traditional interpretations of sacred texts often prescribe gender roles that modern rights frameworks consider discriminatory.

In **Islamic jurisprudence**, many classical scholars permitted male guardianship (*wilayah*) over women, restricting autonomy in marriage, education, and employment. Although modern reformist scholars advocate for contextual reinterpretation (*ijtihad*), conservative institutions continue to resist full gender parity, especially in family and inheritance laws (Mayer, 1999)[5].

In **Christian traditions**, particularly among some evangelical and Catholic communities, opposition to same-sex marriage and LGBTQ+ rights stems from scriptural interpretations (e.g., Leviticus 18:22; Romans 1:26–27). These views often clash with the principle of non-discrimination enshrined in human rights law (Donnelly, 2003)[2].

Theological resistance to such rights is frequently justified through appeals to divine commandments, yet critics argue that this prioritization of orthodoxy over individual dignity undermines the universality of human rights (An-Na'im, 2008)[1].

Apostasy, Blasphemy, and Freedom of Belief

Another critical fault line lies in the **freedom of belief**, particularly regarding **apostasy** (leaving a religion) and **blasphemy** (offending religious sentiments). Modern human rights law, notably Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), guarantees freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, including the right to change one's religion or belief.

In many theological traditions — especially in conservative **Islamic** jurisprudence — apostasy is considered a serious offense. Classical scholars such as Al-Mawardi and Ibn Taymiyyah supported capital punishment for apostasy under certain conditions, viewing it as political treason rather than private belief (Rehman, 2007)[14].

Blasphemy laws, rooted in both Islamic and Christian histories, criminalize irreverent speech against sacred figures or symbols. While intended to protect religious harmony, these laws are often weaponized against minorities and dissenters, impeding freedom of expression (Saeed, 2006)[20].

Case Study: Pakistan's Blasphemy Laws and Global Human Rights Criticisms

Pakistan's legal framework provides a compelling example of the conflict between religious doctrine and international human rights standards. Sections 295–298 of the Pakistan Penal Code criminalize blasphemy, with offenses such as defiling the name of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) carrying the death penalty.

Criticism:

- International human rights organizations such as **Amnesty International** and **Human Rights Watch** have condemned these laws for promoting religious persecution, particularly against **Ahmadiyya**, **Christians**, and **Shia Muslims** (Bielefeldt, 2000)[9].
- The **United Nations Human Rights Council** has repeatedly urged Pakistan to amend or repeal these laws, citing violations of freedom of belief and due process (Stahnke & Blitt, 2005)[16].

Notable Cases:

- **Asia Bibi**, a Christian woman, was sentenced to death in 2010 for alleged blasphemy. Her case drew global attention, leading to her eventual acquittal in 2018 by Pakistan's Supreme Court — yet it sparked nationwide protests and the assassination of two government officials who supported her (Khan, 2017)[19].
- The use of blasphemy accusations in **property disputes**, **personal vendettas**, and **silencing dissent** illustrates the potential for abuse, creating a climate of fear and injustice.

Theological Debate: Progressive scholars in Pakistan and elsewhere argue that Islamic principles of mercy, justice, and no compulsion in religion (Qur'an 2:256) contradict the harsh implementation of blasphemy laws (Sachedina, 2009)[6]. However, political sensitivities and the influence of religious parties often obstruct legal reform.

While theology provides a moral framework supportive of many human rights ideals, it can also generate significant friction — especially when religious authority is invoked to limit freedoms related to gender, sexuality, and belief. Bridging these gaps requires nuanced theological interpretation, legal reform, and courageous dialogue between religious and human rights communities.

4. The Role of Interfaith Dialogue in Human Rights Advocacy

Global Initiatives for Interfaith Cooperation (e.g., Parliament of the World's Religions)

Interfaith dialogue has become an essential tool in building consensus around human rights across religious divides. Global platforms such as the **Parliament of the World's Religions**, the **United Religions Initiative (URI)**, and the **World Council of Churches** have brought together faith leaders to address issues of **religious freedom, gender justice, minority rights, and environmental ethics** (Glendon, 2001)[7].

These initiatives recognize that religious communities, despite doctrinal differences, often share core values such as compassion, peace, and justice — which can be harnessed to advance universal human rights (Chaplin, 2006)[11]. For example, the **2009 Cape Town Commitment** by global evangelical leaders affirmed dignity for all humans and called for justice-oriented action grounded in Christian faith.

Interreligious education and collaborative projects — such as peacebuilding workshops, conflict mediation, and human rights training — foster grassroots alliances and theological rethinking, reducing religious extremism and sectarian intolerance (Haddad, 2002)[17].

Role of Pakistani Interfaith Groups in Promoting Tolerance

In Pakistan's complex religious landscape, interfaith efforts face immense challenges — yet several **grassroots movements and NGOs** actively promote **religious tolerance and pluralism**:

- **Interfaith League Against Poverty (ILAP)** and **Pakistan Council for Interfaith Dialogue** work with religious leaders from Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Sikhism to promote peaceful coexistence.
- **Shaoor Foundation** and **Peace and Development Foundation** facilitate youth dialogue programs and workshops on **freedom of religion and belief**.
- **Religious scholars** like Maulana Abdul Khabir Azad and Bishop Azad Marshall have publicly denounced religious violence and advocated for equal rights for minorities (Rizvi, 2019)[15].

Such efforts have not only challenged rigid interpretations but have also facilitated **policy engagement** with the state on **minority protection, curriculum reform, and peace education**.

Theological Reinterpretation as a Tool for Reform

Interfaith dialogue also serves as a **theological mechanism** for internal reform. It enables scholars to revisit sacred texts within a broader moral and human rights-based context:

- In **Islamic thought**, theologians like **Abdullahi An-Na'im**, **Mohammad Hashim Kamali**, and **Asma Barlas** argue for **gender equality**, **religious freedom**, and **freedom of conscience** through alternative hermeneutics that align divine law with contemporary justice (An-Na'im, 2008)[1].
- In **Christian theology**, liberation theologians reinterpret scripture through the lens of the oppressed, advocating for structural reforms (Hollenbach, 2003)[4].

Dialogue with other faith traditions broadens understanding, encouraging **mutual reexamination** of moral teachings and fostering empathy, which are essential for long-term human rights advocacy.

5. Towards a Theologically-Informed Human Rights Framework

Contextual Hermeneutics and Ijtihad in Islam

A theologically informed human rights model within **Islam** must be rooted in **ijtihad** (independent reasoning) and **contextual hermeneutics** — approaches that allow dynamic engagement with scriptural texts in light of current realities:

- Classical Islamic law emerged from historical contexts; thus, scholars like **Fazlur Rahman** and **Mohammad Abduh** stress the need to reinterpret texts according to evolving social norms.
- **Ijtihad** allows scholars to update rulings, particularly in areas like **women's rights**, **religious freedom**, and **punitive laws**, where classical interpretations may conflict with human rights values (Kamali, 1998)[13].

Bridging Divine Law and Universal Principles

While secular human rights derive from rationalist traditions, theology often appeals to divine command. Bridging these requires **moral convergence** and **shared objectives**:

- Principles such as **justice (adl)**, **compassion (rahmah)**, and **human dignity (karamah)** are embedded in both frameworks.
- For example, the Qur'anic verse "We have created you from male and female... so that you may know one another" (Qur'an 49:13) supports equality and intercultural respect — values echoed in Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Reframing divine law through such lenses promotes theological consistency while affirming international norms.

Case Examples from Pakistan's Civil Society and Judicial Interpretations

Several **Pakistani legal and civil society initiatives** illustrate attempts to harmonize theology with human rights:

- The **Supreme Court's 2014 judgment** protecting minorities' worship rights cited both constitutional guarantees and Islamic values of tolerance (Rehman, 2007)[14].
- The **Council of Islamic Ideology (CII)** has begun reviewing laws on women's rights and child marriage with growing awareness of human rights discourse.
- **Civil society campaigns** like "Paigham-e-Pakistan" — a government-backed fatwa initiative — have condemned extremism and called for peaceful coexistence rooted in Islamic values.

These cases underscore the potential for **legal pluralism**, where **Shari‘ah principles** and **human rights law** can be reconciled through **interpretative reform**, **judicial reasoning**, and **civic engagement**.

Summary:

This article concludes that theology and human rights are not inherently in opposition; rather, they can be mutually reinforcing when interpreted through inclusive, justice-oriented frameworks. While certain theological interpretations may appear to restrict individual freedoms, alternative readings rooted in compassion and human dignity exist across religious traditions. In Pakistan and other pluralistic societies, engaging theology constructively is essential for harmonizing faith with global human rights commitments. Interfaith dialogue, legal reform, and contextual interpretation of scriptures are vital tools for this integration. A theologically grounded human rights discourse holds promise for fostering global ethics rooted in both divine and humanistic values.

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