



THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES ON JUSTICE AND HUMAN RIGHTS IN GLOBAL CIVILIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

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Keywords: *Theological Justice, Human Rights, Civilizational Ethics, Comparative Religion.*

Abstract: *This article explores the theological underpinnings of justice and human rights within various global civilizational contexts. From Abrahamic religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Judaism to Eastern philosophies like Hinduism and Buddhism, theological frameworks have played a critical role in shaping conceptions of justice, moral law, and universal human rights. This study examines how sacred texts, theological doctrines, and religious institutions have historically influenced and continue to shape discourses on human dignity, equity, and the role of divine law. By comparing theological interpretations from different civilizations, the article highlights both convergence and divergence in their approaches to justice and rights. It also considers contemporary debates where religious traditions intersect with international human rights law, arguing for a more inclusive dialogue that respects theological diversity while upholding universal ethical standards.*

INTRODUCTION:

Justice and human rights have been central themes in theological discourse across civilizations. While modern human rights frameworks are often grounded in secular thought, their moral roots trace back to religious teachings that emphasize compassion, dignity, and equity. This article investigates how theology shapes understandings of justice and rights across civilizations, with a focus on how religious perspectives complement or challenge contemporary human rights norms.

1. Theological Foundations of Justice

Justice is a central tenet in the theological frameworks of monotheistic religions—Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—serving as both a divine attribute and a moral imperative for human

conduct. These traditions present justice not only as a legal or social concern but as a sacred duty rooted in divine will and revelation.

Justice in Monotheistic Religions: Islam, Christianity, and Judaism

In **Islam**, justice (‘adl) is a fundamental attribute of God (Al-‘Adl) and is enjoined upon all believers. The Qur’an repeatedly emphasizes fairness in dealings, the protection of rights, and the upholding of moral equilibrium. Surah Al-Nahl (16:90) declares, “Indeed, Allah commands justice, excellence, and giving to relatives...” The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is portrayed as the ultimate model of just leadership, ensuring rights for orphans, women, non-Muslims, and slaves.

In **Christianity**, justice is both a divine characteristic and an expectation of discipleship. The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) introduces mishpat (justice) as foundational to covenantal life, particularly in the prophetic literature (e.g., Amos 5:24, “Let justice roll down like waters...”). The New Testament, especially the teachings of Jesus, links justice with mercy, love, and forgiveness. The Beatitudes (Matthew 5) promote justice through nonviolence and peacemaking, reshaping retributive norms.

Judaism places significant emphasis on tzedek (justice/righteousness), which is seen as the ethical cornerstone of Jewish law (Halakhah). Justice is not merely punitive but restorative, intended to sustain societal harmony and divine covenant. The Torah’s instructions on fair treatment of the poor, strangers, and marginalized communities (e.g., Exodus 23:6, Deuteronomy 16:20) underscore the relational and communal dimensions of justice.

Concepts of Divine Justice and Accountability

Divine justice in monotheistic thought reflects God’s inherent fairness and ultimate authority in judging human actions. In **Islam**, God’s justice is inseparable from His mercy, yet each soul is accountable on the Day of Judgment for its deeds (Surah Al-Zalzalah 99:7-8). Human beings are viewed as stewards (khalifah) on earth, expected to implement justice as a reflection of divine command.

In **Christian theology**, divine justice is often juxtaposed with divine grace. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are interpreted as acts of redemptive justice, reconciling human sin with God’s holiness. **Judaism**, meanwhile, emphasizes a covenantal justice system where divine expectations are expressed through commandments, and breaches are met with both correction and compassion.

The Role of Prophets, Scriptures, and Moral Law

Across all three faiths, prophets are seen as the primary vehicles of justice. **Moses**, **Jesus**, and **Muhammad** are not only spiritual leaders but reformers who challenged unjust systems. Their lives illustrate how divine law, when implemented correctly, becomes a tool for social transformation and ethical governance.

Scriptures—the **Torah**, **Bible**, and **Qur’an**—are sources of divine moral law, setting standards for just living. These texts do not limit justice to rituals but extend it to economic fairness, legal equity, and humane treatment of all. The laws and narratives within them provide both legal principles and moral exemplars that continue to inspire religious ethics and civic codes globally.

2. Human Rights in Religious Thought

Theological traditions across major world religions have long provided moral foundations for what modern discourse terms human rights. Although framed differently across time and scripture, these traditions uphold core values such as the sanctity of human life, care for the vulnerable, gender equity, and minority protection. Rather than merely abstract ideals, these principles are embedded in sacred texts and prophetic teachings, and have been used historically to challenge oppression and uphold human dignity.

Sanctity of Human Life

The belief in the inherent value of human life is a central tenet of religious ethics. In **Islam**, the Qur'an unequivocally states: "Whoever kills a soul... it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one—it is as if he had saved mankind entirely" (Surah Al-Ma'idah 5:32). Life is considered a sacred trust from God (Amanah), and thus protection from harm, whether through unjust war, murder, or social injustice, is a divine obligation.

In **Christianity**, the belief that human beings are created in the imago Dei (image of God) forms the theological foundation for human dignity. This belief underlies teachings on love, nonviolence, and compassion for all, including enemies and outcasts. The parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) reinforces the idea of universal moral obligation to protect and uphold life.

Similarly, **Judaism** emphasizes pikuach nefesh, the principle that preserving human life overrides almost all other religious rules. The Mishnah teaches that to destroy one life is to destroy an entire world, reinforcing a sanctity framework that prohibits murder, unjust killing, and even the negligence of life's value.

Rights of the Poor, Oppressed, and Marginalized

Across religious traditions, justice for the oppressed is not optional but divinely mandated. The **Qur'an** repeatedly emphasizes defending the poor (fuqara'), orphans, and wayfarers, commanding believers to give zakat (alms) as a form of purification and redistribution (Surah Al-Tawbah 9:60). The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) himself was known for his advocacy for slaves, women, and social outcasts, setting a theological precedent for social welfare.

In **Christianity**, Jesus' mission begins with a declaration of liberation: "He has sent me to proclaim good news to the poor... to set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:18). The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) places the poor and meek at the center of God's favor, radically upending social hierarchies.

Judaism's Torah law is replete with injunctions to protect the widow, the orphan, and the stranger (ger). The Book of Deuteronomy (10:18–19) portrays God as one who "executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing." This emphasis reflects a moral responsibility to care for society's most vulnerable.

Gender Justice and Minority Protection in Sacred Texts

Though interpretations have varied over time, sacred texts offer significant foundations for promoting gender justice and minority rights. In **Islam**, while patriarchal norms have often been

imposed culturally, the Qur'an advanced revolutionary rights for women in 7th-century Arabia: inheritance rights (Surah An-Nisa 4:7), the right to consent in marriage (4:19), and spiritual equality (33:35). The Prophet's treatment of women—including his wives and daughters—demonstrates the importance of dignity and protection in Islamic ethics.

Christianity offers both egalitarian and patriarchal interpretations, yet many scholars argue that Jesus' own actions were deeply subversive of social norms: engaging with Samaritan women, defending an adulteress from stoning, and including women among his closest followers. Galatians 3:28 famously states, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile... nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Judaism, while rooted in a historically patriarchal society, includes prophetic condemnations of gender-based injustice. The Book of Proverbs extols the *eshet chayil* (woman of valor), and modern interpretations of Jewish law increasingly emphasize egalitarian ethics grounded in *tzedek* (justice) and *chesed* (loving-kindness).

On **minority protection**, all three traditions share a theological obligation to safeguard non-dominant communities. The Qur'an emphasizes no compulsion in religion (2:256), and treaties during the Prophet's time granted religious minorities protection under Islamic governance. Biblical traditions speak of welcoming the stranger, reflecting a divine preference for inclusion and hospitality over exclusion and oppression.

3. Comparative Civilizational Perspectives

Justice and human rights are not confined to monotheistic religions thought; they emerge in distinct yet compelling ways in Eastern and indigenous civilizations. These civilizational ethics reveal a broad spectrum of values—ranging from inner spiritual realization to communal harmony—underscoring the cultural variability and universality of justice.

Hindu Dharma and Buddhist Compassion as Justice Models

In **Hinduism**, Dharma—a complex and multifaceted concept—governs moral order, duty, and cosmic balance. Justice in the Hindu tradition is less juridical and more cosmic, rooted in *karma* (action and consequence) and *rita* (cosmic order). Texts such as the Bhagavad Gita emphasize *Adharma* (individual moral duty) and the ruler's obligation to uphold righteousness (*Rajadharma*), reflecting a moral framework that protects societal harmony.

Buddhism offers a justice model grounded in *karuṇā* (compassion) and *ahimsa* (non-harm). The Buddha's teachings discourage judgmentalism and retaliation, promoting restorative practices that alleviate suffering rather than punish wrongdoing. The Dhammapada urges believers to "conquer anger with non-anger," reflecting an ethic of transformation over retribution, making Buddhist justice deeply spiritual and peace-centered.

Confucian and African Indigenous Concepts of Harmony and Communal Rights

Confucian ethics in East Asia emphasize *li* (ritual propriety), *ren* (benevolence), and social harmony over adversarial justice. The Confucian model promotes ethical leadership (*junzi*) and societal roles based on virtue rather than legal obligation. Justice, therefore, is a product of harmonious relationships rather than individual rights.

In many **African indigenous traditions**, justice is rooted in community-centric values. Concepts such as Ubuntu (“I am because we are”) emphasize interdependence and reconciliation. Justice is achieved not by punishment but by restoring broken relationships through collective rituals, dialogue, and compensation. These traditions prioritize moral accountability within social networks rather than impersonal law.

Western Christian Legacy and the Evolution of Liberal Rights

Western liberal rights have evolved significantly from their **Christian roots**. The early Church fathers, such as Augustine and Aquinas, developed natural law theories that laid the groundwork for modern rights discourse. The Protestant Reformation’s emphasis on individual conscience later influenced Enlightenment philosophers, leading to ideas of liberty, autonomy, and equality before the law. While often secularized today, the liberal human rights framework owes much to its theological heritage in promoting the dignity and agency of the individual.

4. The Clash or Compatibility Debate

The global diffusion of human rights norms has sparked significant theological and political debates. At the heart of this is the tension between culturally grounded religious systems and the ostensibly universal norms articulated in documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Islamic Shariah vs. Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Critics argue that certain elements of **Shariah law**—particularly in areas of gender roles, apostasy, and blasphemy—conflict with international human rights norms. However, scholars like Abdullahi An-Na’im and Tariq Ramadan assert that these tensions arise not from Islam itself but from rigid, politicized interpretations. They advocate for *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) to reconcile Shariah with universal principles, noting the Qur’an’s emphasis on justice, human dignity, and consultation (*shura*).

The Role of the Church and Religious Lobbies in UN Rights Advocacy

Religious institutions have played paradoxical roles in shaping global rights frameworks. The **Catholic Church**, while initially resistant to modern rights language, has since Vatican II become a vocal advocate for economic and social rights, migration justice, and peace. At the same time, conservative religious lobbies—both Christian and Muslim—have resisted the inclusion of LGBT rights, reproductive health, and gender equality at the United Nations, framing them as Western impositions on moral and cultural sovereignty.

Case Studies: Pakistan’s Blasphemy Laws and the Vatican’s Position on LGBT Rights

In **Pakistan**, blasphemy laws derived from colonial and Islamic sources have been used to justify persecution, often against minorities. The theological argument underpinning such laws claims to protect religious sanctity, yet critics point out their misuse and contradiction with Islamic principles of justice and mercy. Similarly, the **Vatican’s stance on LGBT rights** reflects deep doctrinal concerns about sexual ethics, even as Pope Francis has adopted a more pastoral, inclusive tone. These cases illustrate the complex interplay of theology, state policy, and evolving rights discourse.

5. Contemporary Challenges and Interfaith Engagement

Today's world is marked by rising polarization, religious extremism, and environmental crises, all of which challenge traditional models of justice. Yet amidst these challenges, theology also offers tools for reconciliation, dialogue, and collective action.

The Rise of Religious Nationalism and Its Impact on Justice

In countries like India, Israel, and Myanmar, religious nationalism has fueled policies that marginalize minorities and justify exclusion in the name of cultural purity. These movements often instrumentalize theology for political ends, undermining the inclusive and compassionate roots of religious justice. The result is a shrinking space for pluralism, human rights, and intercommunal peace.

Interfaith Declarations on Human Dignity (e.g., Marrakesh Declaration)

In response, religious scholars and leaders have issued historic interfaith statements reaffirming human dignity. The **Marrakesh Declaration (2016)**, for example, draws from Islamic principles to advocate for the rights of religious minorities in Muslim-majority countries. Other notable examples include the **Document on Human Fraternity** signed by Pope Francis and Grand Imam Ahmed el-Tayeb, promoting peace, tolerance, and coexistence.

Theological Responses to Refugee Crises and Climate Justice

Contemporary theology is increasingly engaged with global challenges like forced migration and ecological collapse. The **Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change**, the **Green Patriarch's** ecological advocacy in Orthodox Christianity, and the **World Council of Churches'** refugee campaigns all reflect how religious values are being mobilized for justice in new arenas. These responses invoke stewardship, compassion, and interdependence as sacred duties, reframing global crises as moral and spiritual imperatives.

Summary:

This paper has examined theological perspectives on justice and human rights from a civilizational lens, underscoring the importance of both shared values and unique doctrinal interpretations. While some traditions have been sources of exclusion and repression, others have advanced powerful moral calls for justice and equity. A nuanced understanding of theology is essential for global human rights discourse. Emphasizing theological pluralism allows us to build bridges between religious communities and the secular human rights movement, fostering a truly inclusive approach to justice.

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