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The Recovery of Human Dignity in Protestant Christianity and Its Ethical Implications

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Abstract: Human dignity, in the Protestant traditions, was generally formulated in reaction to Catholicism. Initial assessments of human dignity were less than enthusiastic and framed soteriologically and contingent on God's saving grace. In contrast, by the middle of the 19th century, human dignity in Protestant theology emerged as a positive anthropological affirmation with significant political consequences. To illuminate this evolution within the Protestant world, this paper provides a narrative sketch that: (1) orients initial notions of human dignity with reference to the ambiguous legacy of Martin Luther; (2) describes how substantial engagements with minority or marginalized populations in the 19th and 20th centuries around the world—including South Africa, India, and the USA—led to a revision and expansion of human dignity; and (3) exhibits the affirmation of a robust understanding of human dignity in Protestant traditions around the world. The argument is both (a) expansive because it highlights developments toward the positive embrace of human dignity across a wide geographic range while also remaining (b) limited because it merely argues that the Protestant traditions universally affirm human dignity, while also acknowledging that frequently there are limits to the performance of that affirmation based on matters of race, nationality, class, and gender.

Keywords: human dignity; Protestant; Martin Luther; slavery; apartheid; Dalit Christianity; ethics; social gospel



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The Protestant Reformation, symbolically represented by Martin Luther's challenge of the practices of the late-medieval Roman Catholic Church, spawned a variety of Christian traditions that have sometimes been rather ambivalent about human dignity. The purpose of this introductory paper is threefold: (1) to orient dominant Protestant notions of human dignity with reference to the ambiguous legacy of Martin Luther; (2) to highlight minority voices within the tradition that have elevated and expanded Protestant accounts of human dignity; and (3) to illustrate the more recent almost universal recovery of a robust understanding of human dignity within the Protestant traditions.

1. Preliminary Orientation

Determining precisely what counts as Protestant and who speaks for the loosely linked traditions lumped under that umbrella is a little dicey. By way of background, Western Christianity was generally united under the Roman Pope from its break with Eastern Orthodoxy in 1054 until the 16th century. There were periodic internal reforming movements within Catholicism, and these were either incorporated into or disciplined by the Church. However, when a relatively unknown Augustinian monk in Germany named Martin Luther proposed a series of theological reforms in 1517, the changing political and social dynamics in Europe (and especially in the German-speaking states) created the context within which his reforms spawned a distinct and separate branch of Christianity which later became identified as Protestant. For this reason, Luther's thought has often been considered the starting point for understanding uniquely Protestant concepts of human dignity.

One of the central features of Protestant Christianity since Luther has been the notion that Scripture is central to understanding Christianity and Scripture can and should be read by every Christian. The Latin phrase *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) captures this sentiment, and it continues to echo as Protestants today approach human dignity. Ben Mitchell's off the cuff comment "where else would a Protestant start?!" captures well the initial instincts assumed in Protestant approaches (Mitchell 2013). And, it is precisely this instinct that brings Protestants very close to Jewish and Catholic approaches to human dignity, since there is significant textual overlap across these traditions.

The strong affirmation of human identity relative to God and the rest of creation in Genesis 1: 26–27 (New Revised Standard Version updated edition) remains the baseline:

Then God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over the cattle and over all of the wild animals of the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humans in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

Or, to cite Matthew 10: 29–31 from the New Testament: "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows". In embracing texts like these, Protestants find themselves building an account of human value and dignity that does not look too different from Judaism and Catholicism. Following this line of thought, John Witte Jr. has argued that Luther's famous *The Freedom of a Christian*, published in 1520, is the theological fountainhead for the political, social, and legal developments in the Protestant world that would emerge in the next centuries. According to Witte, Luther's articulation of a form of Christianity that assumed radical equality among all Christians serves as a "formidable agent of democratic revolutions fought in the name of human rights," that still shapes "Protestant instincts about human dignity, human equality, and human rights today" (Witte 2019).

One of the other central tenets of the Reformation (alongside *sola scriptura*) is *sola fide*, "faith alone," and this additional emphasis radically reframes the course of the conversation about human dignity. With this in mind, Oswald Bayer, with a little less enthusiasm than that of Witte, suggests Luther's *Disputatio de homine*, published in 1536, is the determining document for Luther's concept of human dignity. Rather than appealing to radical equality between Christians, Bayer suggests that Luther's concept of human dignity is tied up in his theology of justification, that is, in his account of salvation, his account of how human beings are redeemed from sin by Jesus Christ. Bayer clarifies:

Luther's eminent interest in human freedom is a general anthropological interest insofar as what is at stake applies to the constitution and dignity of every human being. As such, it is, however, a deeply soteriological interest: it addresses salvation and doom, the gaining or loss of life. The human being is perceived as a sinner: as a creature that controverted its original freedom by abusing it and therefore—of its own accord—forfeited and lost his likeness to God (Romans 3: 23) . . . He regains and receives his freedom only through Jesus Christ, who grants and conveys it to him in a new creation. (Bayer 2014)

The upshot of *sola fide*, at least according to Bayer, is that sin has a profound effect on human dignity, or, to use Luther's own language, the image of God in humans becomes "a lost treasure" (Luther 2012). Stepping back, it is important to note that, in the medieval world, the notion of "the image of God" was frequently identified with rationality, since the ability to reason was thought to be what qualitatively differentiated humans from the rest of the animal world. Further, the Aristotelian emphasis on the cultivation of virtue and the late-medieval commercialization of indulgences created the appearance that dignity is innate within or intrinsic to human beings, that human beings have the inherent reason and ability to merit salvation. Sidestepping the question of whether this appearance rightly corresponds to Catholic theology or not, the stage was set for Luther's emphasis on

salvation by “faith alone,” an emphasis on God’s activity and God’s grace as the source of salvation and all that is good in human beings.

The result is that the restoration of human dignity in a sinful world, for Luther, is necessarily extrinsic, “unconditionally and absolutely bestowed and maintained” by God (Bayer 2014). In this sense, even the radical equality between Christians noted by Witte is still tied to Christians alone on the bases of their justification. In recent years, a version of this emphasis has been emphatically reiterated in David Gushee’s “theocentric-voluntaristic warrant” for human dignity which maintains “a clear emphasis on divine decision and agency in consecrating human life”(Gushee 2020).

Reflecting on Augustine’s gloss on the “image of God,” Luther expands:

What is that image of God? . . . Augustine has much to say in his explanation of this passage, particularly in his book *On the Trinity*. Moreover, the remaining doctors in general follow Augustine . . . they contribute very little toward the correct explanation of the image of God . . . I am not sure that they are very useful . . . I am afraid that since the loss of this image through sin we cannot understand it to any effect . . . We cannot have an adequate knowledge of what that image of God was which was lost through sin in Paradise. (Luther 1958)

Matthew Puffer patiently explicates what is at stake in this passage with reference to human dignity:

It is not difficult to see how this conception of the image of God corresponds to less stable notions of human dignity in which even basic rights might be forfeited or lost by an individual’s sin or gross violations of justice. If human dignity grounds rights to life, liberty, freedom of religion, and the prohibition of torture, but a guilty verdict (e.g., in cases of first-degree murder, crimes against humanity, or treason) might forfeit or invalidate such rights, this corresponds to a view that human dignity might be intrinsic to those who possess it but does not inhere for those who violate some moral obligation. In this account, human dignity is not inalienable or absolute; like the image of God, it can be lost. (Puffer 2017)

Of course, Luther alone does not constitute the Protestant tradition. Later in the 16th century, John Calvin appears to follow Luther’s lead when he is prepared to claim that even though the image of God is not entirely effaced and destroyed, it is so affected by sin that all that remains is a fearful deformity (Calvin 1960). Calvin’s own attention to individual conscience and the more radical reformers’ emphasis on the voluntary nature of the church and adult baptism seem to be small steps inching toward a more robust understanding of human dignity. Yet even these trajectories remained tied to specific Christian identities in a way that left the dignity of others in an ambiguous state.

2. Towards the Dignity of All Humans

As one might suspect, the reforming tradition that gave birth to the Protestant Reformation continued to evolve and branch out in many directions. If one is focusing on human dignity, two significant and significantly different trajectories immediately appear.

The first of these trajectories is best understood as the need step beyond Christianity (or religion in general) to affirm human dignity. Immanuel Kant, a German philosopher of the late 18th century, is perhaps the most famous proponent of human dignity as articulated through practical reason (Hill 1992; Kant 2012). To achieve this end, Kant prioritized practical reason above religion, thereby reinterpreting and containing religion within the limits of reason (Kant 1998). Others would take different routes with the same effect. In sum, these various trajectories recognized a conflict between Christianity and robust accounts of human dignity and, in order to transcend the ambiguities within Protestant accounts of dignity, moved toward intrinsic or capabilities accounts of dignity that dropped the question of salvation and religious orientation entirely.

A second set of trajectories emerged within minority and marginalized Protestant groups that refused the narrow soteriological emphasis of the Reformation without giving

up their Christianity. Rather, these later trajectories recognize that sin has not erased the dignity of all that have been created in the image of God; these later trajectories elevated human dignity within their theological anthropologies, performatively leading the tradition in new directions through example. Three examples of these trajectories deserve a closer look.

1. *Douglass, King, and the American Context.* The graphic and absolutely inhumane story of American slavery is no secret. Already in place by the middle of the 17th century, this crippling system was maintained, supported, and justified by a society consisting primarily of Protestant Christians. Slavery's affront to human dignity seems self-evident today, yet understanding how dignity had been tied to salvation (and subsequently limited to spiritual matters) reveals how truncated Protestant thought—whether in its Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, or Baptist form—had become.

Against this cultivated blindness, minority voices called out on behalf of America's four million slaves. For the sake of brevity, we turn to one of the most prominent as a representative of the Protestant turn toward human dignity in America. In the middle of the 19th century, Frederick Douglass, himself an escaped slave from Maryland turned abolitionist, boldly repudiated all narrow articulations of human dignity in the name of Christianity. In a speech tersely titled "Too Much Religion, Too Little Humanity" given in New York in 1849, he casts a renewed vision of human dignity and its ethical entailments:

The great difficulty about our Christianity is, we have got certain notions about religion that turn off our attention to humanity altogether. We think that religion is the entertainment of a hope. I know there is a hope in religion. I know there is faith and I know there is prayer about religion and necessary to it, but God is most glorified when there is peace on earth and good will towards men . . . This is the religion which Christ came to establish; it was to promote peace on earth and good will towards men . . . Instead of bestowing blessings on the peacemakers, we as a nation confer blessings on the war-makers. Instead of blessing those who feed the hungry and clothe the naked, we confer honour upon men who bury the lash in the quivering flesh of the bondsman, and exalt to the highest office in . . . the nation the men who have been most skillful in teaching the nations war, and blowing out the brains of our enemies. (Douglass 1950)

For Douglass, as for all 19th century abolitionists, simply being a human entails intrinsic dignity that demands recognition and respect. For Douglass, this is not exchanging religion for politics; for Douglass, this is the religion of Christ.

Years later, black churches in America still carried forward this emphasis as they paved the way for the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., himself a Baptist minister, frequently defended the notion of human dignity with claims like "One's dignity may be assaulted, vandalized, cruelly mocked, but it can never be taken away unless it is surrendered." In making this claim, he is very clearly dissociating himself from the 16th century Martin Luther after whom he was named; in this claim lies a deep recognition that some forms of Christianity had become "inhuman" in the pursuit of salvation. On this matter, black churches were the harbingers of the future of Protestant Christianity in America long before the emergence of the "social gospel" in the early 20th century or the civil rights movement several decades later. Today, this trajectory is boldly carried forward anew in Vincent Lloyd's *Black Dignity: The Struggle Against Domination* (Lloyd 2022). Before jumping to the rest of this story, however, we would like to note parallel phenomena that were occurring half a world away.

2. *Naudé and Boesak and the South African Context.* Any discussion of a Protestant Christian understanding of human dignity must also reckon with its global history. And, in a way reminiscent of the American South, Protestant Christianity's complicity in diverse practices and institutional regimes of Africa tragically assaulted the very idea of the dignity of all persons. In this context, it suffices to note that by the early 20th century, over 250 years after the initial immigration of Europeans to South Africa, the Dutch Reformed Church had become the national church of the country, deeply animating its political landscape

and furnishing theological justification for the system of racialized segregation, that is, apartheid, with which South African politics came to be synonymous.

Much like American slavery, apartheid could be sustained only by violence, a violence which robbed any semblance of human dignity from the majority of South Africans. This violence took, first and foremost, institutional shape in the form of constitutional and judicial provisions like the Group Areas Act, laws against mixed marriages, denial of voting rights to Blacks, and so-called security laws which funded police repression of protests, and a racial capitalist economic system in which land ownership was reserved, for the most part, for White South Africans, with Blacks consigned to subsistent occupations at best. Apartheid's violence was also symbolic in as much as skin pigmentation assumed caste-like significations of "good" and "bad," superior and inferior, with the attendant psychic and existential pains inherent in such reifications.

Against the current of this cauldron, Protestant resistance figures like Beyers Naudé and Alan Boesak articulated and embodied a clarity of vision about the dignifying ethos of the Christian message. In an interview with Dorothee Sölle in 1985, Naudé lamented the "slow death" which the political economy of South Africa was occasioning among the Black community. How could it be, Naudé wonders, "that a community, in this case a white community, deeply religious, claiming to be devoutly Christian, building its whole life—or claiming to build its life, and also its political structure—on a recognition of God's sovereignty" could "remove forcibly three and a half million people from their land, from where they live, from where they had settled down, from where they are happy as a community . . . ?" (Naudé and Sölle 1986). The dignity of humans, which any proclamation of the Christian gospel takes for granted, was made total mockery of in this political economy of slow death (and all too frequently, the death was rapid). This incompatibility between the gospel's humanism and the necropolitics of institutionalized and cultured racism was something which Dr Beyers Naudé sought, often at great personal cost, to render visible and accountable in his life and work (de Gruchy 1985).

For those fighting against apartheid, the gospel—understood as the announcement of God's gracious giving of Godself to the world—entails an affirmation of the intrinsic worth of creation, and of humans especially, even if doing so entails a risk of anthropocentrism. But even as the distortion of the gospel was frequently used by European Christians to rationalize the political ideology of apartheid, that same gospel, in its best version, offered in South Africa a basis for challenging the "heresy," as Alan Boesak characterized it, of apartheid (Boesak 1987).

In Boesak we find a liberative Christianity articulated in discursive modes as varied as sermons, speeches, lectures, but also in books, both popular and academic, and anchored on the conviction that Jesus Christ stands always with the oppressed and is committed to their well-being, both in body and spirit. Boesak writes, "racism denies the liberating, humanizing, reconciling work of Christ, the promised One who has taken human form, thereby reaffirming human worth in the sight of God" (Boesak 1987). Boesak makes it clear, in a 1981 address to the Alliance of Black Reformed Christians in South Africa, that it is in fact those very convictions which give identity to the Reformed tradition: scripture as normative guide for doctrine and practice, a refusal to accept sin as the first or final word on creation, and a commitment to social justice made evident in the denunciation of socio-economic injustice in the work of canonical Reformed figures like Calvin, Barth, and Kuyper, which provide a theological basis for rejecting the pseudo-theology of apartheid (Boesak 1984).

3. *Dalit Christianity in the Indian Context.* To indicate the global nature of the recovery of human dignity, we offer a third, all too brief gesture toward the tragic, yet hopeful, struggle of these Dalit Christians to affirm their dignity in the face of cultural, political, and religious forces that have intertwined to militate against such an affirmation. Just as in Africa, European missionaries were crucial to the flourishing of Protestant Christianity in India (Neill 2004). These efforts began early in the eighteenth century with the missions of German Lutherans Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Henry Plutschau to Tranquebar in

1705 (Sherring 1884). By the end of the eighteenth century, an expansion in the Protestant missions in India was already noticeable (Sherring 1884). Yet, it would be in the latter half of the 19th century and the early 20th century that the most significant growth of indigenous Protestant Christianity in India would come about. “Most of this numerical growth,” as historian of Christianity in India John C.B. Webster notes, “came from the large-scale conversions movements among rural Dalits” during this period (Webster 2013).

In the two 19th-century contexts already addressed in this paper, the oppressing party was Christian. Certainly, the British—unequivocally Christian—conquest and subjugation of India cannot be ignored. Yet, the dignity of Dalits was undermined long before the British arrived on the scene. “Dalit,” a Sanskrit word that translates to “ground down” or “suppressed” captures the identity of over sixteen percent (over 166 million) of India’s population, who, historically and to the present, occupy a marginal socio-economic and political status in India. Officially designated as the “Scheduled Caste” by the 1950 India constitution, Dalits were traditionally termed “Untouchables.” “Untouchability” captures the Hindu ritual purity system within which Dalit identity derives its meaning. Dalits are not part of the four-fold caste (*jati*) system. Historically, Dalits were associated with occupations that were socially regarded as unclean, such as disposing of dead animals, sanitation, and cobblery (Lochtefeld 2002). Dalits faced, and still face in parts of India, cultural restrictions on marriage and on the nature and extent of their social interactions with members of higher castes; Dalits, especially those who live in rural India, work in semi-skilled and unskilled occupations, often not making enough money to support themselves and their families, thereby continuing to lead precarious lives (Lochtefeld 2002; Sukumar and Menon 2022; Thorat and Joshi 2020). So, while much improvement in the welfare of Dalits has been recorded in post-Independence India, especially since the efforts of Dalit figures like B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) and the Dalit Panther movement of the 1970s, Dalits continue to occupy a subaltern position in contemporary Indian society. Dalits’ experience of subalternity is even more heightened for Dalit Christians. The Indian Constitution of 1950 explicitly states, in its Scheduled Castes Order, that “no person who professes a religion different from the Hindu [, the Sikh or the Buddhist] religion shall be deemed to be a member of a Scheduled Caste.” Christian and Muslim Dalits do not therefore enjoy the benefits that the Constitution provides for Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh members of Scheduled Castes.

This backdrop provides context for appreciating Dalit theology’s self-positioning as a liberationist struggle for the recovery of the dignity, not only of Dalit Christians, but of Dalits in general. Although Dalit theology became formally inaugurated in the 1980s with the pioneering work of Arvind P. Nirmal and others like James Massey, V. Devasahayam, M. Azariah, and M.E. Prabhakar (Athyal 2004). Pulikottil has argued that precursors of Dalit theology may in fact to be found in the work of some 19th century and early 20th century European missionaries like John S. Hoyland, Henry Whitehead, Bishop Daniel Wilson, and Bernard Lucas, and others who opposed the caste system, especially denouncing caste consciousness among indigenous Christian converts (Pulikottil 2022). To illustrate, Pulikottil quotes a letter from Wilson (who was the Anglican bishop of Calcutta from 1832 to 1858) where he writes “The gospel recognizes no distinctions such as those of castes, imposed by a heathen usage, bearing in some respect a supposed religious obligation” (Bateman 1861; Pulikottil 2022). Even as we must acknowledge the many moral ambivalences of Protestant missions and their legacies in the former colonies of European nations, in a figure like Bishop Wilson of Calcutta, something of an embodiment of the gospel’s emancipatory vision is present.

More significant, however, is the role that these early Dalit converts to Christianity played in the process. While transmitting their theologies primarily in oral form, indigenous Dalit Christians in the 19th century were already beginning to draw upon their new religious identity to challenge their subjugated place within the caste system. Pulikottil mentions, in this regard, the contributions of Dalit Christians like Kumara Guru and Gurram Jashuva.

In “Toward a Christian Dalit Theology”, Nirmal characterizes Dalit theology as “protest against the socio-economic injustices [Dalits] have been subjected to throughout history” (Nirmal 2012). In a similar, and just as radical a manner as Gustavo Gutierrez and James Cone, Nirmal re-tells the Drama of salvation—from the Exodus to the Cross to the promise of the Spirit’s outpouring—in a way that accents the experience of marginality and oppression of Dalits, yet not fatalistically but with practical valency for reforming Dalit consciousness to see God on its side. This was not merely a political protest, but a theologically rooted protest against the inhuman treatment of Dalits. Thus when Nirmal reads the text of Deuteronomy 26: pp. 5–9, he sees the “wandering Aramean” as speaking of the “nomadic consciousness” of present-day Dalits, located as they are on the outside, seeking, even groaning, for liberation (Nirmal 2012). Still, for Nirmal, Dalit liberation and its eschatological horizons is not fulfilled by merely arriving at a “land flowing with milk and honey”, but rather any such horizon is reached when the “ideal of the *Imago Dei*, the image of God in us” is realized (Nirmal 2012). A recovery of the dignity of human persons, saved from the structural sin of religiously and culturally legitimated dehumanization, is, for Nirmal, the *telos* and praxis of Dalit theology.

Circling back to the introductory comments concerning Luther, Andrew Ronnevik rightly diagnoses the key difference between European/American Lutheran conceptions of human dignity and their articulation in Dalit Lutheran theology. Whereas the former stress the “lost dignity of the individual sinner and the imputed dignity of the one who is justified,” the latter place emphasis on the inherent dignity of the “sinned upon” (Ronnevik 2020). For Dalits, as Nirmal argues, dignity inheres in the Dalit self, whereas its articulation in European/American Lutheranism (and most western forms of Protestant theology) tends toward an externalist view of dignity, that is, a conception of dignity as something that comes to the self from outside, conditioned on one’s relationship with God in Christ.

3. The Future of Human Dignity in the Protestant World

Ethiopianism, the late 19th-century religious movement in Africa, is best understood as a struggle to affirm the dignity of Africans in the face of religious and political practices which called that dignity into question. Deriving its identity and inspiration from the text of Psalm 68:31, “Ethiopia shall stretch forth her hands to God,” Ethiopianism was a movement which sought to foreground the agency of Africans in the life, ministry, and mission of the church in African lands. Ethiopian churches in South, Central, and West Africa became training grounds for the raising of a political consciousness that, as in the case of Nigeria, was significant for the political struggles against European colonialism from the early 20th century onward. As Nigerian historian E. A. Ayandele argues, in these Ethiopian churches “the missionary teaching of the equality and brotherhood of all men before God which had been implanted in them came to have its logical effect” (Ayandele 1966).

Prominent figures in these churches like Moses Ladejo Stone, James Johnson, and Samuel Ajayi Crowther, in the West African context, established or supported churches led by Africans in which Africans could worship God for themselves, minister to one another, and do “good works,” unmediated by an often racist European missional leadership which believed that Africans did not have the capacity for self-governance both in religious and in political affairs (Ayandele 1966).

Moving more slowly than those in Africa, Protestants in the Global North began to reimagine human dignity as well. As the World Wars of the early 20th century began to unfold, attention to human dignity became more urgent within virtually all strands of Protestantism. In some sense, one might say that Karl Barth—THE Protestant theologian of the 20th century—legitimated the theological notion of human dignity for European Protestants by returning to God as Creator but also (and especially) to the identification of God with humanity in the person of Jesus Christ (that is, the Incarnation). In that movement, “the honor which every man has as such is from God and therefore constant” (Barth 2004). While retaining the extrinsic source of dignity common to much of the Protestant tradition, Barth assumes its presence in all of humanity.

Yet, when Barth came to this conclusion, he was simply catching up to what was already evident to many ordinary Protestant Christians around the world. Or, to state the issue rather bluntly: global Protestants who had been following the simple teachings of Jesus obediently—e.g., feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, clothing the naked, and embracing the marginalized—discovered human dignity in the hungry, the sick, the naked, and the marginalized . . . whether Christian or not. In the early years of the 20th century, an array of American Christians like Walter Rauschenbush, Josiah Strong, and Washington Gladden began to proclaim a social gospel that fought for everyday dignity through worker’s rights, fair wages, safe working conditions, etc. In the European context, Lutherans like Albrecht Ritschl and Albert Schweitzer, each in their own way, argued something like the call of Frederick Douglass: we must all become more human if the world is to become better.

Looking forward, it seems clear that despite their historical differences, Protestant churches around the world are virtually united in support of human dignity and have roundly endorsed the UN Declaration of Human Rights. For example, the Statement of Faith of the Lutheran Church here in Great Britain proclaims: “This Church affirms the God-given human dignity of all people, rejoicing in the diversity of God’s creation” (Article 9). This is good news.

But, this is also good news that requires constant renewal. It is also important to note that the hard-won acceptance of human dignity in 20th-century Protestantism cannot be taken for granted. The notion of human fallenness that allows an account of human dignity limited to Christians still survives in some rather large evangelical free churches (and particularly in America) (Nichols 2008). Further, notions of dignity that privilege select genders, races, or nationalities are always lurking in the background of Protestant thought and action. And, as it has become clear on matters of refugee migration, race, and Christian-Muslim relations in recent years, this conditional account of dignity can be manipulated to tragic ends in ways that evoke some of the darker corners of the Christian tradition. Much more can and should be said in this respect. Our focus in this context has been to demonstrate that Protestants have, more or less, come to recognize that human beings have dignity that is not contingent on their salvation. That said, carrying through with that theological conviction continues to be difficult, uneven, and contested around the world. As with all our traditions, the future is yet to be written in the hope that we have learned from our mist.

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