

The Persistent Challenge to Human Dignity

By Beverly Eileen Mitchell

The Nature of the Challenge

One of the most important lessons I believe we can learn from the Holocaust is that we must safeguard the dignity of every human being. Yet the persistent violations of this dignity at the hands of fellow human beings have been an omnipresent challenge many decades after the end of World War II. The well-known slogan “Never again” refers to the defiant affirmation from within the Jewish community that they will never allow another Holocaust. While there has been no repeat of the Holocaust in terms of the Jews, there have been other genocides, ethnic cleansings, and mass killings since the end of World War II. These crimes against humanity constitute a persistent challenge to the dignity and welfare of every human being. For those of us alarmed by these kinds of crimes, we have the responsibility to recognize, embrace and propagate the notion of the importance of safeguarding human dignity because of the bond we share as fellow human beings. Historically, an important step in the protection of human dignity is attentiveness to the presence of ideological thinking and/or propaganda in the public sphere that makes dehumanizing practices within society possible.

The ideology of racial antisemitism made the violation of the dignity of the Jews an acceptable practice, if not a patriotic duty in Nazi Germany. Under the charismatic leadership of Hitler, Germans were misled by pseudo-scientific inquiries and cultural ethnocentric assessments that transformed an already present religious antisemitism into a racial one. This more virulent expression of antisemitism enabled the Nazis to justify their resolution of the “Jewish problem,” by the attempt to exterminate the Jewish population in Europe. Ironically, eradication of European Jewry was not enough, for in addition to the slaughter of 6 million Jews, another 5 million non-Jews met the same fate. The value and worth of these unfortunate ones were questioned and their right to exist adjudicated negatively. Deeply flawed fellow human beings determined that these people had less value as human beings, and were, therefore, dispensable. *Who is to say that at some point in time we, too, will not be subjected to the same determinations and assessments regarding our fitness to live?*

One important lesson we can draw from Martin Shaw’s discussion of genocide is that the threat of genocide is present long before the gas chambers asphyxiate or the machetes slash.¹ Such an insight suggests that we must be ever vigilant to conditions, forces, and factors within our socio-political contexts that can sow the seeds of genocide, in order to prevent such crimes against humanity in the future. An ethical imperative to safeguard the dignity of every human being would make such vigilance paramount.

The Nature of Human Dignity

When we think of human dignity we tend to do so with a view of human beings at their best: that is whole, highly capable, physically robust, intellectually sharp, and attractive without obvious blemishes. The far greater challenge in defining human dignity arises when we dare to look at actual human beings, under particular circumstances, in the presence of the degraded and the dehumanized. It is in those very acute places of degradation that we must dare to speak of the presence of human dignity, if we are to speak about dignity at all. To look deeply and theologically, we must accept the challenge of describing and defining dignity from the vantage point of the marginalized, rejected, and oppressed.² Viewing dignity from the “underside of history,” leads us to contemplate whether or not dignity can be lost or taken away. This

perspective forces us into the deeper questions, such as: what makes and keeps us truly human; is our humanness predicated on our social status, physical condition, or intellectual capacity; to what degree do our natural endowments influence the presence or absence of dignity. We are led to ponder whether or not we are ever justified in treating others in certain ways based upon our fallible assessments of their value or worth.

As someone who approaches this from within the Christian tradition, my definition of human dignity is based upon the affirmation in Genesis 1:27 that God created the human in the divine image.³ There are a number of important theological implications for what it means to be human based upon the simple assertion that the human was created in the image of the divine. The first implication is that a measure of glory comes to each human being insofar as s/he is created in the image of God. This “glory,” that arises out of the imprint of the divine on every human creature, is human dignity. Second, because we bear the divine imprint, which imparts a measure of glory, human dignity is a divine grace. As such, it is an aspect of who we are as human beings which cannot be taken away from us by other human beings, for human beings do not have the power to give and take away divine grace. Even when we attempt to deny the presence of dignity in another, we violate but not destroy that dignity.⁴ The inner cry of protest to this violation, whether we can hear it or not, testifies to the continuing presence of that dignity when the value and worth of another is threatened or even denied. Third, because of the gifted nature of human dignity and the human inability to destroy it, this dignity is present in every human being, regardless of race/ethnicity, age, sexual identity, religion, national origin, class, handicapping condition, or other features of diversity which we use to discriminate against others. This dignity remains regardless of our abilities, capabilities or disabilities. It is present at the beginning of life and remains at the end. If this theological baseline is used to establish the value and worth of every human being, then we must protect human dignity whenever it is jeopardized.

Why the Need to Safeguard Human Dignity

The persistent challenge for those who have the courage to embrace the ethical imperative to safeguard the dignity of all human beings is that we have the human tendency to manufacture differences or capitalize on the diversity within the human family to pit one group against the other. We strive to establish that one social group is superior and render other groups inferior. Economic, social, cultural, and political upheaval seems to make such occurrences inevitable. Hence, the tendency to problematize the existence of groups in our societies makes our vigilance necessary. It also makes it incumbent upon us to refuse to acquiesce to expressions of intolerance that place the dignity of others in jeopardy.

The propensity for humans to do evil and avoid the good vexes all who truly love justice and thirst for right relationships. Despite the fact that there are and will be those among us who, for various reasons, succumb to hatred and hostility toward others, those of us who can resist the human impulse to sow seeds of hatred must be willing to become “evangelists” for the protection of the value and worth of every human being, even of our enemies. Perhaps, worse than those who are caught up in ever increasing spirals of hatred and violence, are those who do not hate, but, nevertheless, stand by in silence and inaction toward the breaches of peaceful and just human interaction. In hindsight, our knowledge of the Holocaust during the 12 years of Nazi rule, illumines even more clearly the bitter truth of the old saying, often attributed to Edmund Burke, *"The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."*

The German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemoller articulated the tragedy of indifference when he penned the following poem, from the context of Nazism:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out--
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out--
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out--
Because I was not a Jew.*

Then they came for me--and there was no one left to speak for me.⁵

In another context, at a different historical moment, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., also understood the moral harm perpetuated when those of good will fail to protect or defend those whose human dignity comes under assault, when he wrote,

We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God ...⁶

Faithful to the prophetic ministry to which he was called, King sought to impress upon the so-called “good” people – [moderate, white?] clergymen, no less – that the time was *now* to do the heavy lifting of delivering the southern United States practice of the segregation of the African American out of the “quicksand of racial injustice” onto the “solid rock of human dignity,”⁷

The truth is that indifference and complacency are the enemies of justice because the pursuit of justice requires the passionate engagement of those who dare to care. When “good” people are unwilling to speak out for the vulnerable or intervene in the face of oppression or take risks on behalf of the socially crushed, then they are no longer “good.”

Recognition of our common humanity

It is unfashionable in some academic circles, particularly in the area of contextual theology, to speak about a “common humanity,” to avoid the transgression of hegemonic universalizing. However, as a practitioner of contextual theological reflection, I contend that there are issues within the global community that compel us to consider our common humanity, even as we engage in important, meaningful reflection from particular socio-historical contexts. (The *real* challenge is to perfect the dance between particularity and universality, not to deny the value and importance of considering either one in our discourse.)

As an African-American woman from the United States, one might raise the question as to why I feel a theo-political commitment to vigilance about the growth of antisemitism in Europe and other places. I could devote my energies for vigilance solely on the plight of African Americans who bear the scars and still carry the weight of the burden of the ideology of white supremacy on their shoulders. However, I know that the ideology of antisemitism, like the ideology of white supremacy, is an enemy of human dignity. None of us can afford to circumscribe our commitments to our own silos of concern. In a one-sided focus on contextual theologies, the universality within the particularity of one’s socio-historical context can be obscured. In the need to redress the violation of the dignity of one’s own community of belonging, one can lose sight of King’s insight that, “*We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.*”⁸ The truth of his observation is even more evident, geopolitically, in our time through globalization. While King’s observation is certainly geopolitically true in our time, it has always been theologically true, for we are bound to each

other by the reality that we are all creatures made in the image of God. Hence, there is no room for ideologies, mindsets, or practices that insist that some groups are more human than others. There is no moral justification for attempts to deny the full humanity of any group in our societies. Those who are prepared to make a theo-political commitment to human dignity cannot afford to operate with tunnel vision within that commitment. If we truly recognize what is at stake, then we know that King was right when he said that, “*injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.*”⁹

Neither the much-admired poem of Niemoller nor the well-known aphorism attributed to Burke nor the famous quotations of King should ever be relegated to the category of pious-sounding platitudes, which can no longer inspire passionate commitment. These prophetic utterances retain their force because they get at the heart of what makes safeguarding the human dignity of every human being an ethical imperative: our *shared* humanness makes us siblings in the family of God. Recognizing our common humanity is the first step toward safeguarding the dignity that belongs to each one of us.

Safeguarding Human Dignity

Safeguarding human dignity is both an individual and communal act. I see four practices that we can adopt to safeguard the dignity of others. We can do so through: 1) making a theo-political commitment to protect human dignity; 2) exercising self-critical examination; 3) bearing witness; 4) maintaining vigilance against antisemitism; and 5) engaging in the practice of radical hospitality. I will briefly describe what these practices involve.

A Theo-Political Commitment

It takes a theological commitment to safeguard the dignity of fellow human beings. The grounding for the commitment to protect human dignity that can supersede our petty prejudices, relativize our limited perspectives, and transcend our egocentrism, requires a theological foundation that recognizes the value and worth of every human being as a gift of divine grace. An understanding of human origins which arises from a purposeful Creator, who stamps the divine imprimatur on each one of us, as we find in the Genesis narrative, captures not only the value and worth of each human being, but also underscores the nature of the bonds that ties us to each other. It can illumine the reality that we are enhanced or diminished to the degree that others are enhanced and diminished, and offers a powerful incentive for commitment to the well-being of others.

Safeguarding the dignity of fellow human beings also requires a political commitment. Our theological commitments with regard to our relationship to God and to fellow human beings determine our values. The economic, social, cultural, and political commitments we make arise from those values. Our values determine the way we treat others not only personally, but also collectively. What we truly value is reflected in the socio-political decisions we make and the policies, laws, and customs to which we submit. Whether we are weighing in on welfare reform, immigration, renewal of voting rights, or national healthcare reform, our decisions with regard to these issues reveal the degree to which we are committed to uphold the dignity of all or whether our concerns are limited to “me and mine.” A *theo-political* commitment to human dignity is needed to help safeguard the dignity of all.

Self-Critical Examination

The major problem with ideologies such as antisemitism is that these ideologies constitute more than personal beliefs and attitudes. They tend to permeate the ethos of a society because they become imbedded in customs, laws, and public policies. Consequently, as members of society we imbibe that ethos even when we do not subscribe necessarily to the ideology that

informs it. This is why it is crucial for us to engage in periodic self-critical examination not only of ourselves as individuals, but also as members of various groups within our societies. Fortunately, we live in a time when people are somewhat embarrassed to be accused of being racist or antisemitic. This indicates that people at least find these labels repugnant, even if they have difficulty applying those labels to their own attitudes, beliefs, and conduct. The willingness and the courage to look within as well as without are indispensable in being attentive to the ways in which things we say and do can violate the dignity of other human beings.

Bearing witness

Bearing witness is re-telling the life stories of communities and it is an indispensable way of promoting regard for human dignity. Recounting history, telling younger generations about events such as the Holocaust, black slavery, the Rwandan genocide, the ethnic cleansings of Bosnia, the killing fields of Cambodia must be told often. The practice of bearing witness is ongoing, for new generations emerge which are unfamiliar with the stories, and must hear them for the first time. Even those who have heard the stories need to hear them again. Moreover, it is not enough to tell or re-tell these events. We are also required to explore the causes and significance of them in order to discern the ways in which our current contexts exhibit some of the warning signs that we should address.

Undoubtedly, the practice of bearing witness will evoke resistance from those who resent the reminders. With respect to the Holocaust, there are people who want to minimize its tragedy and impact. Moreover, there are even some who contend that it never happened at all. Silence about the past and acquiescence to the psychological bullying that would lead us to consign the past to the past leaves us ill-equipped to address the ways in which antisemitism reasserts itself in subtler guises.

Vigilance against Antisemitism

Even when we are able to neutralize the prejudices we may harbor against certain groups within our own hearts, our responsibility does not end there. Our vigilance must include a refusal to acquiesce to attitudes and actions that foster and perpetuate the denial of human dignity within our families, work places, social interactions, and even the wider public sphere. Our tolerance of highly inflammatory, irresponsible political rhetoric that degrades targeted groups in our society leaves us all vulnerable to the perpetuation of an ethos of “us vs. them,” that fuels genocidal practices. If we are complacent within our socio-political contexts, we become bystanders in the public sphere. As bystanders, we merely observe and tolerate evil within our midst; and stand by and do nothing. The lessons from the Holocaust should make it clear that we cannot afford to maintain the status of bystanders.

The Practice of Radical Hospitality

Safeguarding the dignity of fellow human beings is proactive. Even as we examine ourselves, remaining vigilant within the socio-political realm, more is required of us. The practice of radical hospitality exemplifies that proactivity; especially when extended toward those who are different from us. Hospitality – opening ourselves to others, welcoming them into our metaphorical and actual borders – expressed our commitments to human dignity in concrete terms. It also renders us vulnerable and takes us out of comfort zones that shelter us from getting to know others for who they are and not for how we project them to be. Radical hospitality, which stretches the bonds of mutuality and reciprocity, changes who we think we are and leads to the transgression of false boundaries. This spiritual practice of inclusion has the power to illumine just how deep our theological ties are to each other and makes our mission to safeguard the dignity of others just that much more rewarding.

Conclusion

These suggested practices for safeguarding the dignity of all human beings are by no means exhaustive of the ways in which we can defend the dignity of others. Although this discussion has articulated a response to the challenge from a Christian perspective, I contend that communities of faith from other religious traditions, which share the same concern for human dignity, can and should consider their own theological responses to the challenge to human dignity. Even as we hold diverse beliefs about the nature of the divine and may ritualize our beliefs in different ways, to the extent that we are willing to unite in the common goal of protecting human beings, we could make significant progress in rendering crimes against humanity as a thing of the past.

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¹ Martin Shaw, *What is Genocide?* Cambridge, UK and Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2007.

² The category “the oppressed” is neither an ontological nor a static condition. I am very mindful that historical circumstances may change. Those oppressed in one context may place themselves in the position of being “the oppressor” in another.

³ I address the topic of human dignity at length in *Plantations and Death Camps, Religion, Ideology, and Human Dignity*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

⁴ Of course, violations of human dignity permeate our collective existence and happen all the time. Nevertheless, these violations do not destroy it.

⁵ Quoted from <http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007392>, *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, “Martin Niemoller: ‘First They came for the Socialists...’” accessed 2/22/14. Controversy surrounds not only where the poem was first quoted by Niemoller; but also the differing versions of the poem, e.g., which groups were listed and in what order.

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” in *I Have A Dream, Writings and Speeches that Changed the World*, ed. by James M. Washington. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992, 92. King’s famous letter, penned in 1963 while he was jailed for participating in civil rights demonstrations, was written in response to “liberal,” “moderate” white clergy who had published an open letter criticizing those nonviolent demonstrations for fear that the resistance of blacks to segregation would incite civil disturbances.

⁷ King, *I Have A Dream*, p. 92.

⁸ *Ibid*, 85.

⁹ *Ibid*.