

Religion and Human Dignity Readings & Discussion Questions

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It has become commonplace for us to think that human beings possess inherent dignity. But what does the notion of 'inherent dignity' mean and what are its sources? Is this a legacy of the Enlightenment thinkers like Kant? Or, does this notion have a longer history, specifically, in the ethical and theological foundations of religious traditions? If different traditions approach the question of dignity in a different way, how can we speak of the idea of human dignity as a norm and how can we envision its universal application?

The list of readings (and a few videos & podcasts) included here represents contemporary thinkers within different religious and philosophical traditions who problematize or help retrieve the value of human dignity and its relation to the question of human rights

First Discussion:

Readings:

<<http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>>

Avishai Margalit, "Human Dignity between Kitsch and Deification"

Jeffrie G. Murphy, "The Elusive Nature of Human Dignity"

Discussion Questions:

What is the place of dignity in the UDHR Preamble? What does "dignity" mean here? What is the relationship between dignity and rights? What comes first? Does it matter?

What are some questions that Margalit raises about dignity? What is the ethical dilemma he is posing and the usual answers to these dilemmas he discusses? Do you agree with his points about the limits and shortcomings of those answers? What does he propose instead? Is Margalit's argument different from Murphy's? Which proposition do you consider to be the best foundation for the approach to human dignity and why?

Second Discussion:

Readings:

Michael Fishbane, "The Image of God and the Human Ideal"

Krista Trippet's interview with Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*

<<https://onbeing.org/programs/jonathan-sacks-the-dignity-of-difference>>

Discussion Questions:

What does Fishbane emphasize in his approach to dignity of human beings? Where does he start and how does he develop his arguments about the Jewish perspectives on what makes human beings distinctive? Rabbi Sacks's argument complicates the universality of Fishbane's approach. Do you agree with his proposition and why?

Third Discussion:

Readings:

Lisa Sowle Cahill, "Embodying God's Image: Created, Broken, Redeemed"

John Paul II, "Laborem Exercens"

<http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html>

Discussion Questions:

What shapes Cahill's perspective? Are there any possible challenges to Cahill's proposal from within various Christian traditions? Using Margalit's reflections on religious definitions of human dignity, how would one approach the critique of both Fishbane and Cahill? What might be some possible answers to such critiques?

What does the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* argue about work in relation to dignity? Is work considered to be the source or an outcome of human dignity? Where does this idea come from? What is the meaning of "work" in this document? Do you agree with the document's: a) premises, b) arguments, and c) social implications? Why?

Fourth Discussion:

Readings:

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Standing before God: Human Responsibilities and Human Rights"

Tariq Ramadan, "Equal Rights and Equal Dignity of Human Beings"

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PjWnWcAZcTA&t=518s>>

Qianfan Zhang, "The Idea of Human Dignity in Classical Chinese Philosophy"

Discussion Questions:

According to Nasr, what is the foundation of distinctiveness of human beings in Islam? What is Ramadan's view of the relationship of religious particularities to dignity? What is the main implication of theological anthropology that Nasr and Ramadan assume in how one's sense of dignity is expressed in everyday life?

What are the similarities and differences among Judaism, Christianity, and Islam based on readings and discussions thus far? How does the Confucian, nontheistic perspective challenge and contribute to the conversations shaped by three Abrahamic traditions?

Fifth Discussion:

Readings:

Richard Amesbury and George M. Newlands, "What are Human Rights" & "Human Rights and the Problem of Grounding"

Abdulaziz Sachedina, "The Clash of Universalisms: Religious and Secular in Human Rights",

<<http://insct.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Sachedina.2007.Clash-of-Universalisms.pdf>>

Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Response: The Irony of it All",

<<http://iasc-culture.org/THR/archives/HumanDignity/9.3GWolterstorff.pdf>>

Why and how did the ideas of human rights emerge historically? When you hear the notion of "human rights," which rights come to mind and why? Why do we prioritize some rights over others? Does our view of dignity—how we define it, where we place it—have something to do with it? Are human rights moral claims or just expressions of our individual privileges? Is the notion of dignity necessary to affirm rights? If so, which of the notions discussed can we assert regardless of cultural or religious particularities?

What is Sachedina's view of human rights and what is Wolterstorff's response to him?