

Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered.

**Edited by Sarah Shortall and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins.
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Human rights language deployed by Christian ethical discourse in the twentieth century is sometimes misunderstood as simple, a straightforward case of progress and modernization, but a closer inspection reveals complexity that is worthy of investigation. While the inattentive reader might ascribe a loose uniformity to the various thinkers who have employed such language, *Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered*, edited by Sarah Shortall and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, invites such a reader to reexamine this assumption and attend to the unsettling plurality that has characterized Christian reflection on human rights in the latter half of the twentieth century. Over the course of the volume's thirteen essays, the reader encounters scholarly engagements with the Christian human rights tradition from diverse and distant perspectives. The result is a volume that is simultaneously dizzying in its depth and dazzling in its breadth.

Every chapter is, to a greater or lesser extent, a reaction to the work of Samuel Moyn, particularly his 2015 book *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press). In that volume, Moyn articulates a two-pronged thesis. The first prong is that the deployment of human rights language by the Catholic Church and many of its notable thinkers in the years following World War II was not an instance of unalloyed progress or even a moderating concession on behalf of the Church. Rather, the account of human rights posited by Catholic ethics in the mid-twentieth century was a co-opting of previously rejected language for the sake of conservative Catholic morality. The rights explicated by these Catholic thinkers were thoroughly contextualized within a framework of natural law and strategically deployed to thread the needle of Christian morality between the failed fascist states of the first half of the twentieth century and the rising secular communist states of the second. The second prong of Moyn's thesis is an implication of the first. As demonstrated by its amenability to conservative natural law, Moyn argues that human rights language is essentially malleable, having little if any intrinsic content. Just as human rights language was deployed by Catholics to serve conservative anti-communist politics, it was later reappropriated for secular means in the 1960s, coinciding with the decline of Christianity in Europe. Despite this reinvention, the inherent instability of rights language means that the conservative vision of human rights can still affect their interpretation. Moyn argues that the secular deployment of human rights against Muslims wearing



headscarves in twenty-first century Europe is such a case of vestigial conservatism affecting the interpretation of rights within contemporary jurisprudence.

Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered is premised on Moyn's argument, and as the author of its preface he helpfully summarizes some of his major points. Even where Moyn is not specifically referenced in the contributions, his work serves as the backdrop by which certain reconsiderations are declared fair game.

Shortall and Steinmetz-Jenkins have organized the essays into four distinct sections: the first consists of general reflections on the relationship between Christianity and human rights language, the second revisits Moyn's own territory of European Catholicism and human rights, the third expands the scope to America, and the fourth expands beyond the anglophone West entirely. The outcome of this broad exploration is succinctly summarized in Shortall and Steinmetz-Jenkins's introduction: "there were not one, but many forms of Christian human rights in the twentieth century" (13).

The first section opens with an essay by John Milbank. He directly targets Moyn's argument with relish, arguing that Moyn too easily writes off the Christian revision of human rights as conservative and regressive. Somewhat predictably, Milbank argues that this line of thinking was a genuine moral alternative to the left/right divide and in fact did not go far enough in promoting general dignity over individual rights. It makes for an enjoyable bit of polemic but readers familiar with Milbank's thought may find it redundant. The next essay, by Julian Bourg, also aims squarely at Moyn by examining him alongside his ardent critic John Finnis. Bourg relativizes Moyn's argument by placing his claim about the repression inherent in Catholic human rights within the much more mundane contexts of majority rule and modern anti-Catholicism. Thus Moyn's thesis is rendered less radical and less attendant to the actual historical ambiguities of the twentieth century. He ultimately chides Moyn for foreclosing the possibility of Catholicism offering certain unique goods to the liberal project. These two large-scale engagements are fascinating but are best read with a solid understanding of Moyn's work and a decided tolerance for Milbank's tropes.

Shortall and Steinmetz-Jenkins restrict the scope of the second section to European Catholicism, with contributions asking how Catholics came to embrace human rights in the twentieth century. The section opens with an essay by James Chappel that examines the historical details of the Catholic turn to human rights. Chappel argues that this turn was facilitated by the failure of various forms of non-liberal Catholic politics. The specifics of this turn, however, varied between thinkers, being deployed by both conservatives and socialists for their own purposes. Chappel's essay is followed by Carlo Invernizzi Accetti's analysis of papal documents mentioning human rights, which argues that Catholics articulated an illiberal conception of human rights. Unlike Moyn, Accetti extends this narrative into the 1960s and rejects the idea that there is any continuity between these Catholic human rights and the rights talk used by secular liberals and leftists in the 1970s. Udi Greenberg follows with an account of the Anglo-American movement radical orthodoxy that argues the movement's resistance to religious freedom makes it a poor ally to left-leaning egalitarianism. Camille Robcis's essay on the language of dignity in modern French jurisprudence, which is understood as a communal value that often places limits on individual freedom, wraps up this second section. These chapters add nuance to Moyn's account of twentieth century Europe's usage of rights talk and its modern implications without straying significantly afield of, and occasionally overlapping, the territory that he covered in *Christian Human Rights*.

In the third section, Shortall and Steinmetz-Jenkins shift the focus to America, specifically to the influence of American Protestantism on twentieth century rights language. The first of the chapters in this section, by Gene Zubovich, examines the role of liberal Protestant philosopher William Ernest Hocking's influence on the mid-century human rights project. The second, by P. MacKenzie Bok is a fascinating look at John Rawls's early intellectual

formation and the usage of human rights language in his liberal protestant milieu. The third, by Vincent Lloyd, chronicles African American activist Paul Robeson's usage of dignity as an ethical category in a manner unique to his experience of the Black church, distinct from the Catholic usage of the term. This section provides a helpful rejoinder to Moyn as the contributions examine Christian accounts of human rights that are significantly distanced from the crypto-conservatism that Moyn criticizes.

For the volume's final section, Shortall and Steinmetz-Jenkins turn the attention away from Europe and North America entirely to highlight underexplored accounts of human rights from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The first essay, by Albert Wu, explores the twentieth century reversal of the Catholic Church's prohibition on Chinese Catholics' participation in Confucian rites as a means by which the church attempted to prevent the rise of communism. Elizabeth Foster follows with an account of the influence of African Catholic thinkers, particularly Alioune Diop, on the church's relationship with the non-Western world. David M. Lantigua shifts his focus to the latter half of the twentieth century in his examination of human rights in Latin America, which he argues has manifested in both neoliberal and liberationist forms. The final essay is an account by Christopher Tounsel of the use of Sudanese saint Josephine Bakhita as a symbol for human rights throughout Sudan's recent history. These essays add further scope to the volume and help to provide a perspective that Moyn's work does not directly comment on.

As should be clear now, the volume's breadth is staggering. In fewer than three hundred pages the reader is exposed to a significant number of major thinkers and ideas in the area of modern human rights. Such thoroughness does lend the volume some repetition. The most glaring cases are the chapter by Milbank, which shares much with the subsequent essay by Greenberg on radical orthodoxy, and Zubovich's essay on William Ernest Hocking, which is followed by one by Bok that resummarizes Hocking's thought. As with all edited volumes, some essays shine brighter than others, even if they all have their merits. Chappel's, Robcis's, and Bok's essays stood out in my reading as robust contributions.

As a response to Moyn's project, the collective effect of the volume is a nuanced perspective. The contributors assail the first prong of his argument with a torrent of both confirmations and disputations. The ultimate effect is that Moyn's characterization of Christian human rights as a conservative phenomenon stands as a viable interpretation of certain strains of twentieth century Catholic thought but proves limited in its explanatory power more broadly. This interrogation of Moyn's first point, however, only serves to validate his broader argument. In the volume's diversity of perspectives, the malleability of rights language is on full display. Moyn's argument that rights language lacks significant intrinsic content, thus, finds much implicit support.

In *Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered*, Shortall and Steinmetz-Jenkins have compiled a useful text. For anyone engaging with Moyn's work, it is certainly required reading. The same goes for researchers interested in the subjects of any of the particular chapters. (Tounsel's essay on Saint Josephine Bakhita would make a fascinating companion to Nichole Flores's book on Our Lady of Guadalupe, *Aesthetics of Solidarity: Our Lady of Guadalupe and American Democracy* [Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021], reviewed elsewhere in this issue.) It must be said, however, that a robust understanding of Moyn's project is indispensable for engaging the individual essays. One can imagine an excellent graduate seminar integrating this volume with Moyn's text and primary source readings. *Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered* asks much of its readers, but if they are discerning, they will find that it also has much to give.