
Promoting Human Rights and Human Dignity in an Axial Age

Michael L. Penn

Michael L. Penn is a Professor of Psychology at Franklin & Marshall College. His research interests and publications include works in the pathogenesis of hope and hopelessness, adolescent psychopathology, the relationship between culture and psychopathology, human rights and the epidemiology of gender-based violence. Professor Penn is the author of *Overcoming Violence against Women and Girls: The International Campaign to Eradicate a Worldwide Problem* published by Rowman & Littlefield in 2003 and serves on the Permanent Board of the Tahiri Justice Center in Washington, D.C. The authors owe a special debt of gratitude to the late Mathematician and Philosopher, Professor William S. Hatcher. This project received its funding from the Hackman Scholar's Program at Franklin & Marshall College.

Aditi Malik

Aditi Malik is a doctoral student in Political Science at Northwestern University and a graduate of Franklin & Marshall College. Her primary areas of focus are Comparative Politics and International Relations, with a special emphasis on the study of human rights, genocide, and post-genocide state-building. She conducted field research in Cambodia during the summer of 2007, and is particularly interested in applying qualitative and interpretive research methods to the study of state-building in post-genocide Rwanda, East Timor, and Cambodia.

Tri Nguyen

Tri Nguyen is a former researcher assistant whose work with Professor Penn was funded by the Hackman Scholar's Program at Franklin & Marshall College.

Atilla Cidam

Atilla Cidam is a doctoral student in Psychology at the University of Connecticut.

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Introduction

In 1953 the German philosopher, Karl Jaspers, wrote *The Origin and Goal of History*. In that important book, Jaspers described the period between 800 and 200 B.C.E., which he called the *Axial Age*, in the following way:

In this age were born the fundamental categories within which we still think today, and the beginnings of the world religions, by which human beings still live, were created. The step into universality was taken in every sense. As a result of this process, hitherto unconsciously accepted ideas, customs and conditions were subjected to examination, questioned and liquidated. Everything was swept into the vortex. In so far as the traditional substance still possessed vitality and reality, its manifestations were clarified and thereby transmuted.¹

During the Axial Age there appeared on the horizon of human consciousness a series of reverberations that were to shake, dismantle, and reconfigure the foundations of human thinking in various parts of the world.² This period of history saw some very extraordinary people appear. These include Confucius and Lao Tze in China, the Buddha in India, the Prophets of Israel in Mesopotamia, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in Greece, and the extraordinary visionary—Zoroaster—in Persia.

The Axial Age was remarkable because it was a time of great upheaval and suffering, a time of tremendous violence, instability, and social disruption. The violence was facilitated by new technologies of death associated with horsemanship and the invention of the chariot. But the Axial Age was also a time when humanity, as a species, acquired the conceptual tools and the social pressures that would compel it to build a new mind. Since the mind is the reservoir from which civilization flows, the Axial Age gave birth to new forms of civilization.³

¹ Jaspers, K. (1953). *The Origin and Goal of History*. Yale University Press, p. 2.

² For a discussion of these themes, see Robert Bellah and Hans Joas (eds.) (2012). *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*. Belknap.

³ It was during the Axial Age that small groups in the Middle East, India, China, and Greece began to reflect upon fundamental questions—and they began to reflect upon these questions by thinking systematically about them. The human species began to subject its thinking to critical scrutiny and doubt. In this way was philosophy as a discipline born. Superstitious thinking began to loosen some of its grip as philosophers, such as Thales, Anaximander and Anaximenes, began to ask – What are the fundamental constituents of the world? Is it made of one kind of substance that appears in many forms (the one) or is it a composition of different kinds of elements (the many)? And they asked these questions as if the answers could be arrived at, not by invoking an ancient myth, but by deep reflection and thoughtful discourse.

During this period Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle began to ask questions about the nature of human values – What is justice, what is love, how might these great forces be cultivated? What is the best system of governance – who should govern and why? What is the basis of identity and what is the nature of a cause? To the east, Confucius in China began to speak about the goals that should animate human society and his ideas were extraordinary for their usefulness, their simple elegance and profundity.

In Persia Zoroaster suggested that we live out our lives in a kind of moral ecology and that each person has moral responsibilities to himself and to others. He suggested that the quality of our existence depends upon the way that we discharge these moral responsibilities. Few had thought of humans as moral agents endowed with the capacity to choose a moral course and thereby to enrich their own lives and the lives of others. We tended to think of our destinies as shaped by forces that were largely beyond our control. Thus under the influence of the teachings of Zoroaster new aspirations began to animate human life.

In India the Buddha provided a tremendous reservoir of insight into what contributes to human suffering and how existential suffering could be overcome. He prescribed the cultivation of compassion, detachment, and wisdom as antidotes to many forms of suffering and suggested that right speech, right intention, right action, right effort, right mindfulness, right livelihood, and so forth, would serve as potent remedies to suffering. He suggested further that we would be happier if we avoided excesses of all kinds.

We invoke the memory of the Axial Age because it could be argued that for a little more than a century and a half we have been living in another axial period in human history. As compared to earlier eras, the rate of growth and change, in nearly every sphere of human engagement, has accelerated greatly. For example, alongside unprecedented degrees of suffering and exploitation, we have seen a flowering of human aspiration for freedom, for an end to conflict and violence, for greater sharing of the world's resources. We have seen an explosion of knowledge about the condition of the world and this expansion of awareness makes it possible for us to address problems the likes of which we have never considered before. Nowhere is change greater than as relates to relations among and between peoples of different cultures, races, classes, and nations. The global scope and ethical core of the changes underway are captured succinctly in humanity's growing concern for human dignity, development, and human rights.

When we seek to protect human dignity we are concerned with guarding the human race from that which would thwart or arrest the actualization of human potential. And while dignity, as the literature and discourse on human rights suggests, is the birth right of all human beings, as the horrific violence of the twentieth century has shown, human dignity is vulnerable to ideologies that justify the sacrifice of human security and development to private, cultural, or national interests. In this paper we suggest that if the unique capacities and potentialities that define the human species and that provide a focus for human rights are to be safeguarded, the influence of the doctrine of materialism on the effort to advance human dignity will need to be addressed.

Our overall purpose is to demonstrate that modern conceptualizations of human rights and human dignity embody a universal notion of what it means to be human; that the emergence and global spread of such a notion is an essential element of the spirit of the age in which we live and serves as one of the most significant conceptual achievements of our times. We seek further to show that contemporary conceptualizations of human rights and human dignity are in tension with materialism because they are grounded in the recognition that the protection of civilization, in all of its forms, depends not merely on the machinery required for material development, but upon the protection and cultivation of the universal moral, intellectual, and spiritual capacities that are embodied in the notion of the "human spirit". Here we provide a rational account of the nature and needs of the human spirit and suggest that to the extent that development and human rights advocates neglect discussion of it they surrender the civilizing process to the narrow range

In Mesopotamia there lived the prophets of Israel who began to speak about the responsibilities of kings and peoples to a higher justice. "Do what is just and right," said Jeremiah. "Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place." The Jewish prophets were to provide the conceptual fodder for the assertion that Martin Luther King Jr. would make 2500 years later when he affirmed that although "the arc of the moral universe is long, it bends towards justice."

of accomplishments that may be brought within the scope of those materialistic philosophies that have dominated development discourse for a half century. We begin our exploration of these themes by reflecting on the great moral and conceptual achievement of the century just ended.

The 20 Century and the Dawn of the Consciousness of the Oneness of Humankind

The twentieth century was the most turbulent century in the history of the human race. Referring to this period, the Universal House of Justice wrote:

Let us acknowledge at the outset the magnitude of the ruin that the human race has brought upon itself during the period of history under review. The loss of life alone has been beyond counting. The disintegration of basic institutions of social order, the violation – indeed, the abandonment – of standards of decency, the betrayal of the life of the mind through surrender to ideologies as squalid as they have been empty, the invention and deployment of monstrous weapons of mass annihilation, the bankrupting of entire nations and the reduction of masses of human beings to hopeless poverty, the reckless destruction of the environment of the planet – such are only the more obvious in a catalogue of horrors unknown to even the darkest of ages past.^{4,5}

Notwithstanding the devastation visited upon the human race during the twentieth century, that century has also been referred to as “the century of light.” The light that marked the twentieth century as a turning point in the history of humankind was the dawn of the consciousness of the oneness of humanity.

In reflecting on the significance of this development, the scientific journal *Nature* published an edited volume containing twenty-one discoveries reported in that journal during the twentieth century that “changed science and the world.”⁶ The journal titled their volume, *A Century of Nature*, and opened it with the 1925 paper reporting Raymond Dart’s discovery of *Australopithecus africanus*. Dart’s discovery in physical anthropology was revolutionary because it was the first in a chain of discoveries that would prove the monogenesis of all peoples. Dart’s work, which linked all human beings to a common ancestor, would be followed by similar discoveries made by many others over the course of the century.⁷

In the young science of psychology, the principle of the oneness of humankind was to be demonstrated in the discovery of universal principles that govern the nature and development of the human brain and mind, and that shape human response to justice and love—as well

⁴ Universal House of Justice, *Century of Light* (Haifa, Israel, Bahá’í World Centre, 2000, p. 1).

⁵ According to reliable estimates, World War I alone left 8,528,831 soldiers dead, 21,189,154 wounded, and 7,750, 919 either as prisoners or missing. Another 150 million people would be lost to various ideologies before the century’s end.

⁶ Laura Garwin, Tim Lincoln, Steven Weinberg *A Century of Nature: Twenty-One Discoveries That Changed Science and the World*. (University of Chicago, 2003).

⁷ See, for example, Brenna M. Henn, Christopher R. Gignoux, Matthew Jobin, Julie M. Granka, J.M. Macpherson, Jeffrey M. Kidd, Laura Rodriguez-Botique, Sohini Ramachandran, Lawrence Hon, Abra Brisbin, Alice A. Lin, Peter Underhill, David Comas, Kenneth Kidd, Paul J. Norman, Peter Parham, Carlos D. Bustamante, Joanna L. Mountain, & Marcus W. Feldman (2011). *Hunter-gatherer Genomic Diversity Suggests a Southern African Origin for Modern Humans*. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, Vol. 10, no, 13, 5154-5162; and Christopher Stringer and Robin McKie (1998). *African Exodus: The Origins of Modern Humanity* (Henry Holt, 1996); and Andrea Manica, William Amos, François Balloux, and Tsunehiko Hanihara (19 July 2007). *The Effect of Ancient Population Bottlenecks on Human Phenotypic Variation*. *Nature*, Vol. 448, 346-348.

as injustice, cruelty, trauma and violence.⁸ Notwithstanding appreciation for the vast range of human diversity, today, all of the sciences that take as their focus the human being affirm the essential oneness of the human race.

In the realm of ideals and collective aspirations, the principle of the oneness of humankind would incarnate itself in a practical way in 1945 with the establishment of the United Nations.⁹ The Preamble to the UN Charter affirms “faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.” Following in December of 1948, ratification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provided the first globally agreed upon covenant that would enshrine international commitment to the principle of the essential oneness of humankind.¹⁰ At the heart of the document was the inspiring conviction that each human person is born into the world as a trust of the whole and that notwithstanding our diversity we constitute a single human family.

In addition to the birth and evolution of the human rights movement, as Frances Fukuyama has argued, the twentieth century saw the victory of liberal democracy.¹¹ And while many scholars dispute Fukuyama’s conclusion that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ‘triumph of democracy’ signified ‘the end of history’, it would be reasonable to argue that during the twentieth century the liberal democratic movement won many friends. Indeed, democratization efforts continue to spread across the world today.¹² Underlying the growing popularity of this system of governance is the recognition that democratic rule is more in harmony with the protection of human rights than authoritarian, oligarchic, or monarchic regimes. Part of the appeal of democracy is that it shows respect for human dignity by empowering human beings to develop their innate capacities and affords opportunities for the use of those capacities in the governance of human affairs.

⁸ See: Shalom H. Schwartz & Wolfgang Bilsky, *Toward a Universal Psychological Structure of Human Values*. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 53(3), 550-562 (1987).

⁹ See: Mary A. Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. (Random House, 2001).

¹⁰ See: Yael Danieli, Elsa Stamatopoulou, E., & Clarence Dias *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Fifty Years and Beyond*. (Baywood, 1999).

¹¹ Frances Fukuyama, *The end of history and the last man*. (Free Press, 1992).

¹² See, Michael Mandelbaum, *Democracy Without America: The Spontaneous Spread of Freedom*. *Foreign Affairs*, 86, pp. 119 -130 (2007); and Paul Abramson, & Ronald F. Inglehart, *Value Change in Global Perspective*. (University of Michigan, 1995).

Protection of Human Dignity Requires Recognition of the Oneness of Humankind

We have argued elsewhere that the universal capacities that define and distinguish the human species are embodied in the notion of the *human spirit*.¹³ These capacities consist of the capacity to know, the capacity to love, and the capacity to will. When awakened and nurtured, the capacity to know stirs humanity in its ceaseless search for knowledge and wisdom; the capacity to will motivates us to pursue that which is thought to be good; and the capacity to love animates our attraction to beauty and our longing for connection to nature, to one another, and to that which is sacred. Human development results, essentially, from the cultivation and refinement of these capacities. As these capacities unfold and express themselves in the life of the community, we see the emergence and efflorescence of the sciences, arts, and systems of ethics and jurisprudence upon which civilization depends. We also witness the incarnation in human action, and in the functioning of human institutions, those virtues that redound to human honor and dignity, and which give order and harmony to the social world.

We have suggested that the health and prosperity of humankind depends upon the actualization of these capacities; that these capacities constitute humanity's intrinsic value; and that the protection and development of these capacities is the ultimate goal of all morally authentic relationships and all legitimate systems of community and governance. The development and protection of the human spirit thus serves as an appropriate focus for adjudicating the moral legitimacy of any human act, any social policy, or any cultural practice. For these reasons the protection of the human spirit provides the essential focus for all human rights endeavors. In addition, over the course of the twentieth century efforts to protect the human spirit have come to focus increasingly on the preservation of human dignity. One reason for this is a growing recognition that human dignity is tied inextricably to the capacities that animate the human spirit and that the protection and development of the human spirit is the only sure way for advancing the prosperity of humankind in the fullest sense of the term.¹⁴

When we speak of human dignity, we are concerned with the dignity that goes hand in hand with being a human being. As we have suggested, the widespread notion that all human beings constitute a single race, and thus share common needs and aspirations is, historically speaking, a new idea. Prior to the twentieth century, the concept of dignity was largely tied to social address and was a matter of social permission. In the minds of the masses, human dignity was

¹³ Michael L. Penn, & Aditi Malik, *The Protection and Development of the Human Spirit: An Expanded Focus for Human Rights Discourse*. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 32, pp. 665-688 (2010).

¹⁴ See: Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*. (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Martha Nussbaum, (1998). *Cultivating humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education*. (Harvard University Press, 1998); and Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*. (Oxford, 1999).

very much linked to hierarchy and one's racial, gender, or economic status in comparison to the status of others.¹⁵

At the end of the second World War, as a consequence of the hubris and inhumanity of the Nazis, the concept of dignity began to center upon the inherent value of the human person – whatever his or her race, nationality, culture, creed, or station in life. Today, the “inherent worth of human beings” is the vocabulary that is customarily employed in human rights literature to capture the notion of human dignity. *In other words, the notion of human dignity has become tied to the irreducible ontological status of each member of the human race.* “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” affirms Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. “They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.” The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights requires that “all persons deprived of their liberty shall be treated with humanity and with respect for the inherent dignity of the human person” (Article 10); and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights prescribes that “education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity” (Article 13). Further references to the protection of human dignity appear in a number of international covenants, transnational accords, and national constitutions.

It was, of course, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who, in the 18th Century, introduced in the clearest and most detailed terms, the concept of intrinsic dignity. It would take more than two centuries, however, for this idea to find universal expression in humanity's political affairs. The concept of intrinsic dignity has had to compete with conceptions of human beings that sought to associate human dignity with ephemeral standards and socially constructed values—such as skin color, gender, degree of material culture, level of education, or religious affiliation.

¹⁵ See: Mette Lebeck, *What is human dignity?* Maynooth e-Prints and eTheses Philosophical Papers (ed. by M. Lebeck), pp. 59-69 (2004) available at eprints.nuim.ie/392/1/Human_Dignity.pdf; and Oscar Schachter, *Human Dignity as a Normative Concept*. *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 77, No. 4, pp. 848-854 (Oct., 1983); and Jack Donnelly, Human Rights and Human Dignity: An Analytic Critique of Non-Western Conceptions of Human Rights. *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 303-316 (June, 1982).

References to Human Dignity Proliferate

Inasmuch as the preservation of human dignity is a prerequisite for safeguarding the healthy development of the human spirit, references to human dignity in official human rights documents have proliferated. A content analysis, undertaken by the current authors, of more than 100 human rights documents penned over the course of the last century reveals more than a dozen ways that the concept of human dignity serves as a basis for advancing human rights claims:

1. Protection of human dignity provides a standard for judging whether a practice (e.g., state sponsored torture; capital punishment; female genital mutilation) or a government policy (e.g., apartheid) ought to enjoy the support or incur the condemnation of the international community;
2. Protection of human dignity provides a basis for condemning all forms of discrimination and a ground for state sponsored responsibility to overcome the pernicious effects of particular doctrines (e.g., the doctrine of inherent racial, ethnic, or gender superiority);
3. Protection of human dignity provides the logical foundation of equal treatment of all people – including equality of access to nutrition, health care, education, employment, self-determination, privacy, etc.;
4. It provides a basis for holding states responsible for the protection of cultural identity (e.g., the protection of a people's language and their right to use it);
5. It provides guiding principles for policies concerning the treatment of minorities, immigrants and disadvantaged groups;
6. It provides a basis for regulation of the business sector against practices that assault the human spirit (e.g., human trafficking, sexual harassment);
7. It provides special provisions for the protection of those whose circumstances may make it difficult for them to protect themselves (e.g., women and children in armed conflict, those held in detention, the mentally disabled; the elderly);
8. It provides a rationale for defending standards for adjudicating the proper representation of groups in the media;
9. It provides a rationale for providing adequate health care to all persons – irrespective of their sexual orientation;

- 10.It provides justification for the condemnation of forced disappearance;
- 11.It provides a rationale for why prosecutors, law enforcement officials, and lawyers must show respect for the human spirit as the essential agents of justice;
- 12.It justifies the condemnation of humiliating and degrading treatment by agents acting on behalf of the state;
- 13.It provides the reason for having to give due consideration to the legitimacy of biomedical procedures in the pursuit of scientific knowledge;
- 14.It provides justification for honoring the right to privacy.

What is common to all of these usages is the recognition that human rights can be protected only when the moral conditions that are necessary for the development and expression of human capacities are preserved and the ethical standards that are required for the preservation of human dignity are respected.

An Overly Materialistic Focus in Human Rights and Development Discourse

Notwithstanding the recognition that the preservation of human dignity requires the protection of humanity's unique spiritual and intellectual capacities, as has been noted by Kenneth Pargament and others, for most of the twentieth century academics, development workers and human rights advocates have either ignored humanity's spiritual capacities and concerns, viewed them as pathological, or treated them as by-products of processes that can be reduced to more basic underlying psychological, social, and physiological functions.¹⁶ The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity put the issue in the following way:

The assumptions directing most of current development planning are essentially materialistic. That is to say, the purpose of development is defined in terms of the successful cultivation in all societies of those means for the achievement of material prosperity that have, through trial and error, already come to characterize certain regions of the world. Modifications in development discourse do indeed occur, accommodating differences of culture and political system and responding to the alarming dangers posed by environmental degradation. Yet the underlying materialistic assumptions remain essentially unchallenged.

As the twentieth century draws to a close, it is no longer possible to maintain the belief that the approach to social and economic development to which the materialistic conception of life has given rise is capable of meeting humanity's needs. Optimistic forecasts about the changes it would generate have vanished into the ever-widening abyss that separates the living standards of a small and relatively diminishing minority of the world's inhabitants from the poverty experienced by the vast majority of the globe's population.

This unprecedented economic crisis, together with the social breakdown it has helped to engender, reflects a profound error of conception about human nature itself. For the levels of response elicited from human beings by the incentives of the prevailing order are not only inadequate, but seem almost irrelevant in the face of world events. We are being shown that, unless the development of society finds a purpose beyond the mere amelioration of material conditions, it will fail of attaining even these goals.¹⁷

As has been noted by William Hatcher, "to succeed, the human enterprise needs knowledge that is both true (accurate) and useful (for the satisfaction of human needs)."¹⁸ The twentieth century revealed an essential complementarity between the empirical and rational demands of science and the ethical conduct required of human beings if our relationships to one another and to nature are to secure life and promote development. At the heart of an approach that has

¹⁶ See, Kenneth Pargament, Gina M. Magyar-Russell, & Nichole A. Murray-Swank, *The Sacred and the Search for Significance: Religion as a Unique Process*. *Journal of Social Issues*, 61, 665-687 (2005); and Kenneth Pargament, *Is religion nothing but...? Explaining religion versus explaining religion away*. *Psychological Inquiry*, 13, 239-244 (2002).

¹⁷ Bahá'í International Community Office of Public Information, *The Prosperity of Humankind*. (1995), available at <http://reference.bahai.org/download/prh-en-pdf.zip>.

¹⁸ William S. Hatcher, *Minimalism: A Bridge Between Classical Philosophy and the Bahá'í Revelation* (Juxta, 1994), p. 10.

begun to crystalize in the wake of the devastations of the last century is an ethical commitment to the oneness of the human race and the conviction that life and development are sustained by the creation and maintenance of unity within the context of diversity. In contrast to a wholly materialistic perspective, the emerging paradigm affords consideration of ethical and spiritual principles vital to any meaningful discourse on human needs and human rights. If they are to be comprehensive, if they are to escape the quagmire of superstition, and if they are to be universal in their appeal, these principles must be derived from an integration of knowledge obtained through empirical research, reasoned discourse, and the writings of the world's wisdom traditions —as they constitute the primary reservoir of humanity's ethico-spiritual heritage.

The tradition of human rights and development scholarship that is required for this new age must seek to harvest the greatest insights contained in all of the world's sacred, philosophical, and empirical traditions. Its epistemological outlook, its methodological openness, and its commitment to rendering scholarship a tool for the advancement of civilization are incompatible with parochial commitments to any particular ideological, methodological or epistemological camp. We must be inspired by a vision of pragmatic scholarship and deep philosophical inquiry into the human condition that has begun to emerge in the light of the pressing needs of the twenty-first century.

Human Dignity, the Human Spirit, and Human Rights

The protection of human dignity requires the recognition that each person possesses inherent value that is independent of any purpose that their labor, or their bodies, or even their minds may serve. Emmanuel Kant, David Velleman and William Hatcher have each suggested that perception of another's intrinsic value, which is inherently linked to their dignity, is the basis for all genuine human relationships. In Velleman's view, a minimal perception of human dignity generates respect, while a maximal response to it evokes the spirit of love. What respect and love have in common is that in both cases, the individual is seen as possessing inherent value and her goals and aspirations play important roles in determining the course of human affairs. In the realm of human rights law, such concern for another is embodied in the concern for justice.¹⁹

In his important essay, "Love and Barriers to Love" Raymond Bergner argues that the inability to perceive humans in all their uniqueness and dignity is the chief obstacle to love.²⁰ In quoting Singer, Bergner writes that in true love, "The lover takes an interest in the beloved *as a person*, and not merely as a commodity." He goes further to note that "Love is a relationship in which, for the lover, the beloved is another person—is, in Martin Buber's terms, a "thou" and not an 'it'." Loving involves what Martha Nussbaum calls *eudaimonistic* judgments: the judgment that something is valuable because it empowers a person to lead a good human life and the judgment that an individual is of intrinsic value. The claim is that another has value that does *not* depend on one's own personal goals and projects. In other words, another's value is not merely a matter of social utility. Nussbaum further claims that if it is to be ethical, an emotion that takes as its focus another human being must involve this dimension.

One may contrast this perspective with an appetite one might feel towards, say, food. Leaving aside consumption of animal products, for most of us, food does not have inherent value. Its only value is that it serves to keep us alive. My interest in food, for example, is only about *me*, nothing else. In Nussbaum's words, it is a *push*: there is something in *me* that requires fulfillment and food satisfies the criteria. There is a similarity here to Bergner's concept of the "imperialist role assigner" who "loves" others only insofar as they fulfill a personal need. No perception of intrinsic value exists, and this absence of real concern for the other insures a me-centered relationship. The global crisis in human trafficking, the exploitation of women and girls that is a common feature of the sex trade and pornographic industries, the high rates of

¹⁹ Justice regulates the expression of individual self-interests by requiring that the rights and needs of others be taken into consideration when determining a course of action. In this way, justice embodies the recognition of interdependence and makes community life possible. In the absence of justice, disunity, conflict and resentments are catalyzed and the social world becomes dangerous and unpredictable.

²⁰ Raymond Bergner, *Love and Barriers to Love*. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, 54, No. 1, pp. 1-17, (Winter, 2000).

violence perpetrated by governments in the pursuit of power, and the dehumanizing suffering that results from chronic poverty and unemployment in many parts of the world are among the social ills that reflect disregard for human dignity.

The significant development with respect to international human rights law is that the value of the human person can now be conceptualized in two different senses. First, human rights initiatives seek to protect the physical security and integrity of the human person by providing access to those political rights that would empower the community to protect itself from the tyranny of the state²¹; and second, thanks to second²² and third²³ generations of human rights, as well as the pioneering work of Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Johannes Morsink, Jack Donnelly and others, human rights aim, increasingly, to secure the identity of persons as persons.²⁴ Thus, we are coming to recognize that notwithstanding the power of international law to protect against assaults to the physical security and integrity of persons as members of specific groups, the dignity of humankind can be protected if, and only if, the cultivation of the capacities that distinguish and ennoble human life become the focus of our common striving as a species.

²¹ Thus, human security, we argue, helps human beings realize human dignity.

²² Speaking broadly, these rights seek to protect economic, social, and cultural rights.

²³ Broadly construed, third generation rights include rights to self-determination, the right to participate in one's culture, collective rights, communication rights, the right to a healthy environment, and so forth.

²⁴ At the same time, however, it is important to take note of the fact that within international law, the designation of what constitutes a people is inchoate. Except for the 1970 "Friendly Relations Declaration" legal definitions of peoples have been few and far between. This has created some conceptual issues in delineating collective standards for the protection of human dignity.

Summary and Conclusion

We have suggested that over the course of the twentieth century a universal concept of human identity began to emerge. Such a notion takes as its focus the human spirit and concern for the protection of the human spirit has empowered the architects of the human rights movement to justify human rights claims. We have suggested further that the protection and refinement of the human spirit has been inextricably linked to the protection of human dignity because human dignity derives from the capacities that define and animate the human spirit. These capacities include the capacity to know – which takes as its object truth, the capacity to love – which takes as its object beauty, and the capacity to will – which takes as its object that which is perceived to be good. From these three capacities flow all of the artistic, social, moral, intellectual, and technological resources that render human life both possible and meaningful. For these reasons we argued that preoccupation with the material aspects of society, without due regard to the protection and refinement of the human spirit confuses means with ends, endangers human dignity, and imperils achievement of human rights goals.

Throughout our discussion, we sought to advance the thesis that the emergence of the concept of the oneness of humanity represents a new stage in the long evolutionary process in the collective life of humanity. Were we to draw the implications of this concept to its logical conclusion, it would imply a very great leap forward in human rights discourse because it implicates the need for a radical change in the structure of human society. The magnitude of the transformation that the oneness of humanity implies has been captured succinctly in the work of Shoghi Effendi with which we now close:

Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind...is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper...Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family...It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. It constitutes a challenge, at once bold and universal, to outworn shibboleths of national creeds – creeds that have had their day and which must, in the ordinary course of events...give way to a new gospel, fundamentally different from, and infinitely superior to, what the world has already conceived. It calls for no less than the reconstruction and demilitarization of the whole civilized world – a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units. It represents the consummation of human evolution – an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into

the institution of independent and sovereign nations...It has its indirect manifestations in the gradual diffusion of the spirit of world solidarity which is spontaneously arising out of the welter of a disorganized society.²⁵

²⁵ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Baha'u'lláh, (U.S. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), p.206.