

DAVID B. DILLARD-WRIGHT
Drew University

BOOK PROFILE: *DOES HUMAN RIGHTS NEED GOD?*

A profile of Elizabeth M. Bucar and Barbra Bennett, Editors, *Does Human Rights Need God?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005. 405 pp. \$38.00 (paper). ISBN: 0-8028-2905-8.

THE SECOND INSTALLMENT in the Eerdmans Religion, Ethics, and Public Life Series, *Does Human Rights Need God?* grew out of a Pew Forum in 2002-2003 at the University of Chicago by the same title. The essays tackle the many thorny problems that arise when specific religious discourses both undergird and contradict the ostensibly generic, secular claims of human rights language given expression in the 1945 United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The general language of the Declaration intentionally stripped human rights from any ties to a specific religious tradition while simultaneously regarding religion as a human right, creating a vacuum in which religious scholars and practitioners must reconcile (or choose not to reconcile) the particularities of religious tradition with the vagaries of international instruments. The essays in the volume explore this complex terrain in which religion can be invoked to affirm or deny human rights, and the problem is investigated from a variety of secular and religious perspectives.

The book is divided into three parts: Religious Appraisals, Secular Responses, and Regional Experiences—divisions that should be taken as loose themes rather than explicit categorizations (the essays spiral around the central question rather than attempting to break it down into discrete chunks). The first section includes essays by Protestant theologian Max Stackhouse, Orthodox theologian Vigen Guroian, Talmudic scholar David Novak, Islamic legal scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl, and comparative literary scholar Anthony Yu. The essays tend to take themes from particular traditions (such as Orthodox “theonomous” humanity in the Guroian essay or Confucian desire in the Yu essay) and then apply them to the question of human rights, as if translating secular rights language into particular religious positionalities. The essays in the section range from explicitly arguing for religious perspectives to critiquing aspects of existing traditions to make them more amenable to rights discourse.

The second section, *Secular Responses*, includes an essay on natural law theory by Robert George, a contribution on some general conflicts between religion and human rights by Louis Menkin, and an article on fundamentalism and women's rights by Courtney Howland. The three authors in this section are primarily experts on international law, and they use contextual experience to outline the obstacles that religions pose to the full institutionalization of human rights. Secular perspectives are increasingly important when religions reify and enforce boundaries that human rights discourse would de-emphasize. Gender differences, for example, are traditionally defined and strengthened by religious norms, and, especially in fundamentalist strains, become the basis for the most extreme rights violations. Religions also frequently advocate for a violation of a fundamental religious freedom: the right to not be religious. The essays in this section explore these conflicts and make suggestions for safeguarding citizens from the more alarming tendencies of religious fervor.

The final section, *Regional Experiences*, rounds out the volume with articles loosely tied to geographical regions. Sarah Nussibeh, an active participant in the Israel-Palestine peace process and an expert in Islamic philosophy, contributes a chapter on the absurdities and excesses of religious belief in perpetuating conflict in "Palest-El." An article on the South African rights struggle by ethicist and anti-apartheid activist Charles Villa-Vincencio follows. A third chapter by Czech Ambassador and Hannah Arendt scholar Martin Palouš reverses the thematic question by asking, "What Kind of God Does Human Rights Require?" Robert Seiple, U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and former World Vision, Inc. President, comments on issues involved with the International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) passed by the U.S. Congress in 1998. The essays in this section highlight the complexity of the human rights picture as national governments, competing religious groups, and international law must coordinate in order to safeguard individual freedoms. Often guaranteeing one right means determining another to be of lower priority. Sarah Nussibeh, for example, points out that Palestinians are confronted with the choice of the right of return or the right to statehood. The essays bring philosophical, religious, and historical perspectives to bear on these multivalent, often intractable problems.

Overall, *Does Human Rights Need God?* brings together a wide array of scholars with distinguished records in academia and public policy who skillfully present the commonalities and disjunctions between religious worldviews and human rights. Readers may wish to approach the volume with a single issue in mind (e.g. women's rights) or from the perspective of a single conflict (e.g. Israel-Palestine), and the overlapping nature of the essays makes them well-suited for such treatment. Of course, the volume doesn't answer the question that it asks, nor should it be expected to do so. One of the important lessons that the book

offers is that when it comes to religion and politics, easy answers are frequently the ones most to be avoided.

DAVID B. DILLARD-WRIGHT is a doctoral candidate in Philosophy of Religion at Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. His research interests include human nature, human rights, and human-animal relationships.