

## **PRIESTHOOD OF ALL BELIEVERS AND RIGHTS OF ALL HUMANS**

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But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1Pet.2:9 *NIV*)

Since the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights* was made in 1948, human rights has become an essential concern for our global community.<sup>1</sup> Among Christians, there are diverse responses towards the declaration. Some Christians use theological concepts such as the image of God to affirm it.<sup>2</sup> However, some Christians criticize it as a sign of human self-righteousness, since it emphasizes rights rather than virtue, and is anthropocentric rather than theocentric.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this paper is not to solve this disagreement, but rather to provide a

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the issue of human rights, to some extent, must be included in the agenda of every meeting between the Chinese and the American governments, no matter what the nature of their meeting is.

<sup>2</sup> An obvious example of this is natural theology. It emphasizes the general revelation of God. Therefore, theology has no difficulty affirming the idea of natural rights. It holds that individuals have rights on the basis of a natural criterion. And it treats these rights as morally basic and claims that these rights are objective.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of these are the works of Stanley Hauerwas and James M. Gustafson.

different perspective for considering the issue of human rights. This perspective is one based on the belief in the priesthood of all believers. The significance of this perspective is that it is not primarily concerned about the ontological nature of humans, but rather bears witness to the history of the struggle for human rights — i.e., the right to priesthood. This history reminds the church to stand up for the fundamental rights of people.

### **Why the Priesthood of All Believers?**

The priesthood of all believers and human rights are concepts that have no obvious relation, for the former only concerns believers (Christians), and has nothing to do with non-believers. In other words, it is a rather exclusive concept. Furthermore, it is purely a religious concern. It says nothing politically or socially. But I do not agree that it has nothing to do with human rights, because firstly, the priesthood of all believers is basically not a doctrine formed and thought out in a metaphysical way, but rather it is concerned about the role of Christians and its practical implication. Put differently, the history of the priesthood of all believers witnesses to a history of struggle between those who deprive the right of priesthood from all believers and the believers themselves (I will come to this later). Indeed, it is a religious struggle, but it is a struggle against the distorted conscience and the dominated class. Therefore, it is also a political struggle. This historical experience is relevant to the experience of the struggle for human rights.

Secondly, the belief of the priesthood of all believers provides us an alternative model to the understanding of human rights. What I mean is that those who criticize the concept of human rights use the stories of Babel (Gen.11) and of the demand of self-determination of Israelites (1Sam. 8) as models to indicate that the idea of human rights is a symbol of human pride. In other words, it is sin.<sup>4</sup> But the concept of the priesthood of all believers suggests that an emphasis on the importance of human autonomy does not necessarily lead to self-righteousness. Rather it is a necessary means for helping one to fulfill one's calling on earth.

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<sup>4</sup> Traditionally speaking, sin is understood as pride (ὕβρις). An obvious example is the work of Reinhold Niebuhr. For him, sin is the pride of power, the intellectual pride and the moral pride.

Finally, the concept of the priesthood of all believers is both dynamic and christologically grounded. It is dynamic, for it is concerned about its practical meaning rather than its metaphysical status. What I mean is that we cannot talk about the priesthood of all believers without putting it into practice. Otherwise, we miss the essence of this teaching. Besides, it is christologically grounded, for Jesus Christ is our high priest (Heb. 4:14-16) who is the only mediator between God the Father and us, and the model whom we have to imitate.

Before discussing the concept of the priesthood of all believers in further detail, I would like to make two more remarks. Firstly, it is not a matter of how a belief in the priesthood of all believers justifies or supports the contemporary understanding of human rights, but how human rights is understood in the light of this belief. My starting point is not the concept of human rights, but the priesthood of all believers. Therefore, it is not a matter of whether the teaching of the priesthood of all believers is parallel to the idea of human rights, but rather how it may challenge, inspire and transform our understanding of human rights. Secondly, the perspective of the priesthood of all believers does not provide us the precise contents of human rights, for the Christian faith is a gospel rather than a law. Nevertheless, Christian contribution to human rights lies in its praxis. It is a praxis of caring about the rights of others as well as ourselves. It is a praxis of spirituality that sustains our commitment to the welfare of the people.

### **The Priesthood of All Believers: A Historical Background**

We all know that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers was not created by Martin Luther, but rather has its origin in the Bible, both in the Old Testament (Ex.19:6) and the New Testament (1Pet. 2:9). If these passages are talking about the equal status among believers in a religious sense, then the Christian church in history has mostly failed to live up to this belief. An obvious example is that the medieval churches used the statement "Thou shalt not plough with an ox and an ass together" (Deut. 22:10) to support the idea of separation of clergy and laity. In fact, the Second Council of Seville (A.D.619) used this passage to forbid the laity to hold office in the church.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the clergy and the laity were utterly different in status and function, and

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<sup>5</sup> Stephen Neill ed., *The Layman in Christian History* (London: SCM, 1963), 113.

had to be kept apart. In this sense, when the clergy regarded themselves as shepherds, it was no longer about their responsibility towards the laity, but their superiority over them. It was not love and sacrifice that were concerned, but status and power that mattered. This is exactly the historical context of Luther's emphasis on the priesthood of all believers. In a letter responding to the challenge of Emser, Martin Luther stated firmly that there was no such thing as a "spiritual priest" and a "physical priest."<sup>6</sup> All believers were priests both in a spiritual and physical sense. Luther wrote, "Thus it is even more indeed true and evident that no man can deny that St. Peter's saying is addressed to all Christians, be they young or old, men or women. Clearly, therefore, everything that is comprehended in [the physical priesthood] must be understood as given to all these Christians."<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, to ignore the teaching of the priesthood of all believers is not restricted to the time before the Reformation. But even now, the above misunderstanding of the role of laity and clergy still takes place in history. Why?

Firstly, it is the level of education that separates clergy from laity, and vice versa. We all know that in the Middle Ages (A.D.1000-1500), the laity were mostly illiterate. They were dependent upon what their clerical contemporaries chose to tell them. They had no resource to challenge or evaluate any teaching of the clergy. They just accepted it no matter whether the teaching was right or wrong. Besides, due to their illiteracy, the laity were unable to play any "active" role in the church. They were always the recipients. We can say that the laity were just the people who were weak and powerless, and because of this, they were easily oppressed or deprived, and had no thought of complaining. Although today our situation is much better than the past, and more people can receive education, this does not necessarily improve the relationship between clergy and laity. It is because theological training is still largely restricted to the church candidates.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the status of clergy and laity remains unchanged, for clergy are those trained with sound theology. Their theological knowledge qualifies them to be the

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<sup>6</sup> According to Emser, all Christians were entitled to the spiritual priesthood that would come true only in the eschatological future, while only the priests were entitled to the physical priesthood which allowed them to hold church office, administer sacraments and preach.

<sup>7</sup> Eric W.Gritsch, *Luther's Works*, vol.39 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 234.

<sup>8</sup> I know that this may not be true in so many countries. But generally speaking, those in Hong Kong who choose to study theology have to write a testimony of being called, and to submit a letter of recommendation from the church.

leaders of the church, while the laity remain in the passive role of assisting the clergy in fulfilling their vision coming from God. Do I give preference to the Baptist model; that is, the laity are the final decision making body? My concern here is not to denounce the clergy's role, but to search for a relatively balanced role between clergy and laity.

Secondly, the separation between clergy and laity is not only a personal issue, but also a class issue. It is no longer a matter of whether an individual cleric is willing to open his/her ministry to laity, or whether a lay person can hold a significant church office, but rather a matter of whether the church authority largely represented by clergy is willing to democratize the church structure. History shows us that it is always impossible, for self-preservation is the most fundamental characteristic of institutions. This applies to the church and to the worldly governments. This is exactly what Karl Marx talked about when he said that the capitalists would never give up their wealth for the sake of justice voluntarily, and so, a fair distribution could only be achieved by revolution. Since the era of Constantine, the Christian church became a privileged church. Wealth and imperial patronage corrupted it, and later, it became bureaucratic and hierarchic. The church was no longer characterized by the cross and suffering, but by wealth and power.<sup>9</sup> Separation between clergy and the laity was the way to maintain its interest and power. This is the background of the Reformation. The Reformation was about changing the church as a whole, and was not simply about a doctrine of justification. The church as a whole has to be reformed in order that the universal priesthood can be practised. Therefore, to struggle for the priesthood of all believers is not simply a religious struggle, but a struggle against a class ideology. Do I suggest something like the Society of Friends (Quakers), that is, anarchism? My concern here is not to overthrow the church government, but to ask for a more humane structure.

Thirdly, a false mentality of people enhances the separation between clergy and laity. This is a dualistic mentality, namely, seeing things in terms of either sacred or profane. Until now, this mentality is still found among us. We cannot blame anyone responsible for this mentality. It is something coming out from our nature. how does this bear on the

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<sup>9</sup> For Luther, the theology of the church at that time is a theology of glory rather than a theology of the cross. A theology of glory betrays the nature of the church.

current discussion? Put simply, clergy are those who are called by God to serve his people, and no one can enter this ministry without the calling of God. Logically speaking, it is the calling of God that matters, not the ministry. But existentially, we unconsciously sanctify the ministry itself and make those who are called holy. As a result, the clergy are representing a different class that has God's blessing. On the other hand, the laity are "inferior", for they are not called. The clergy then are the people to whom we should show our obedience and respect, for they are the servants of God. This kind of mentality is further affirmed by the church authorities making the claim that only the clergy can administer baptism, the Lord's Supper, and other sacraments. Such claims unavoidably weaken the role of laity in the church. This is exactly why Luther reinterprets the meaning of vocation in order to reject such a false mentality.<sup>10</sup> In this understanding, the concern of the belief of the priesthood of all believers is a task of "demythologization."

Are the laity themselves responsible for the separation between clergy and laity? It cannot be denied that the laity have some responsibility. Their mistake is that they do not fight for their rights. This makes the violation of the universal priesthood possible. Nevertheless, they cannot be blamed too strongly, for their failure is a result of their powerlessness. Under the threat of excommunication and the fear of ultimate condemnation, it is understandable that the laity are not willing to speak up. Perhaps, the concept of social sin explains this meaningfully.<sup>11</sup> The historical background of the priesthood of all believers shows us that through the course of history, by mutual consent and co-operation of clergy and laity, the initial sinful choices or actions become patterned — that is, they form structures. The sinful choice and its effects become embodied in external structures and more subtly in the attitudes and perspectives of those involved. Eventually the accepted pattern comes to be seen as objective reality — both by those who benefit from the established structures and even by those who are oppressed by them.

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<sup>10</sup> For Luther, vocation is not restricted to the ordained minister, but applied to every Christian, for without the calling of God, no one can become Christian. Therefore, every Christian is called to be Christian.

<sup>11</sup> See Mark O'Keefe, *What are They Saying about Social Sin?* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1990).

## **Priesthood of All Believers: A Theological Review**

In the doctrine of justification expounded in Romans and Galatians, Luther found the clue to the unity and solidarity of all Christians. There is neither priest nor layperson, canon nor vicar, rich nor poor, Benedictine, Carthusian, Friar Minor, nor Augustinian, for it is no question of this or that status, degree, order; such is his gloss on Gal.3:28. By baptism and through faith Christians are incorporated into the death and resurrection of Christ, and so into the one fundamental Christian estate. In a letter to Spalatin in December 1519 he enunciated a view of a universal Christian priesthood that he published in the three great manifestoes in 1520. Luther found his doctrine in such Scriptural passages as 1Peter 2:5,9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6; Gal. 3:28; and John 6:45.

What are the main points of the teaching of the priesthood of all believers? Firstly, before God all Christians have the same standing, a priesthood in which we enter by baptism and through faith. Every Christian, in this sense, is one who believes in Jesus Christ, and the same standing before God has nothing to do with gender, race, occupation or class. In other words, clergy are not closer to God than laity. In contemporary usage, this is the equality of humans. Besides, our priesthood does not derive from the nature of humans, but is given by the grace of God (baptism and faith). Therefore, this is not something that we can earn, because we are not worthy of it. It is always given rather than achieved. Nevertheless, this gift has nothing to do with our intelligence and goodness, but is unconditionally bestowed by God. Thus, no one has the right to deprive us of our priesthood. Nor has one the right to grant us priesthood, for it is a gift from God by grace.

Similarly, human rights are not something granted by the government. Nor can we earn them. Rather they are something "in born" (given by God ontologically) in human beings. Was the doctrine of universal priesthood conceived out of an anti-clerical feeling? Of course, not. Throughout his writings, Luther said nothing about the abolishing ordination. Rather, he stated, "what would happen if everyone wanted to speak? It would result in chaos like the chatter of housewives on their way to the market, all talking at once and nobody listening. Likewise, if many hands were doing baptism, the poor baby would drown. I say that according to the institution of Christ and the apostles, every city should have a priest or bishop, as Paul clearly says in Titus

1."<sup>12</sup> What is then the relationship between clergy and laity? Their difference is mainly a matter of function or role rather than a matter of superiority. In this understanding, clergy are simply those who are called to this particular ministry to serve God and his people, while the laity are those who are called to be the witness of God in the secular world. Both are priests. Priesthood has nothing to do with one's work place, but is primarily related to the calling, being Christians. The purpose of the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is to break up the dualistic mentality, and to return the status of priesthood to the laity.

Secondly, as a comrade and brother of Christ, each Christian is a priest and needs no mediator apart from Jesus Christ. He has access to the Word. So often, in the history of the church, clergy are given a "mediating" position. For instance, only the clergy have the right to exercise sacraments, and to preach. As a result, they gradually become mediators between God and His people. What I mean is that they bring the message of God to us (through preaching), on the one hand, and bring our prayer and offering to God, on the other. The role of the laity is passive. They do not consider that they themselves are the priests. The doctrine of the priesthood of all believers challenges this understanding. Ironically, it affirms that the laity can come to God directly without passing through any mediator in terms of a hierarchical system (besides Christ). They can respond to God freely without the mediating role of the "professional" priests. In this understanding, the practice of the priesthood of all believers brings an identity crisis to the professional clergy. But what is the role of the "professional" priests? They have to realize that they are the people called to help others realize and exercise their priesthood. Their task is to serve, and they do not have any monopoly of the truth. This is a humble service.

However, the concept of the priesthood of all believers should not over-estimate the status of believers. Otherwise, they may become another manipulated class. We always know that we cannot come to God without depending upon Jesus Christ. Indeed, no person or institution can replace the role of Jesus Christ as the mediator. In the light of this, when we talk about the role of the government, the government is always a trustee of the people and is asked to run the country for the

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<sup>12</sup> Carl E. Braaten, *Principles of Lutheran Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 44.



benefit of the people. It should never see itself as the only mediator between goodness (God) and the people. Otherwise, it will become a totalitarian regime and demand ultimate loyalty from the people. Furthermore, the role of the government is to help its people to rule their country. Therefore, democratization is the direction in which every government should go. Put strongly, democratization is a reliable way to realize the concept of the priesthood of all believers.

Thirdly, each Christian is a priest and has an office of sacrifice, not the Mass, but the dedication of himself/herself to the praise and obedience of God, and to bearing the cross. The last two paragraphs put much emphasis on the right of the priesthood of all believers. It seems that this may give us a sense of self-righteousness. This is exactly the danger when Christians pay too much attention to the doctrine of justification by faith, and neglect the doctrine of sanctification. Justification by faith then becomes a camouflage for one's selfishness, unrighteousness and disobedience.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, it is vital for us to highlight the other side of priesthood, namely, a life for others. What model does Jesus as a high priest exemplify to us? I highlight two things here. Fundamentally, the incarnation of Jesus reveals to us that for the sake of his people, God becomes flesh. Jesus does not care about his right of being God, because he cares more about the lives of his people (Phil. 2:5-11). Priesthood of Jesus is not primarily a privilege, but is involved in a process of self-denial. So, his love leads him to give up his right, and take the rights of his people seriously. Besides, Jesus' practice shows us that the right of priesthood is never for the sake of self-satisfaction, but rather is for the protection of the rights of others. An example of this is that Jesus welcomes children (Lk. 18:15-17). Who are the children? Biblically speaking, children are those who are weak and dependent. Apart from the physical aspect, children are weak because their voices are seldom respected and taken seriously. Furthermore, their rights are easily denied in order to preserve the rights of the adults.<sup>14</sup> The act of Jesus' welcoming children shows that he speaks for those without a voice, and defends the rights of children (the weak). This is the way that Jesus chooses to exercise his rights. The call to priesthood is always a call to care and love. Without such

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<sup>13</sup> This is exactly what D. Bonhoeffer criticized the churches for at that time. He employed concepts of costly grace and cheap grace. See his work, *The Cost of Discipleship*.

<sup>14</sup> See *The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

elements, the right of priesthood would be easily distorted. In this understanding, human rights are not only concerned about the rights of an individual human, but should be concerned about how to exercise our rights in relation to the protection of the weak. Therefore, human rights become a means of helping us to realize that others have the same rights as us, and to defend their rights when their rights are deprived.

Finally, Luther never understands the priesthood of all believers merely in the "Protestant" sense of the Christian's freedom to stand in a direct relationship to God without a human mediator. Rather he constantly emphasizes the Christian's evangelical authority to come before God on behalf of the brethren and also of the world. The universal priesthood expresses not religious individualism but its exact opposite, the reality of the congregation as a community. The priesthood means "the congregation" and the priesthood is the inner form of the community of saints. Christ's priesthood and the Christian's priesthood belong together, as reconciling faith in Christ and the community of saints together constitute the nature of the church. So, the Christian's priestly sacrifice is nothing other than Christ's own sacrifice. What about human rights? Human rights are not only about the rights of an individual community, but the rights of humans as a whole. It is always a tragedy to protect the rights of an individual community at the cost of the rights of other community. This does happen in human history. For instance, the rights of the Korean ethnic minority in Japan are disregarded by the Japanese government, or the rights of the "two-third" world are sacrificed for the interest of the first world. Human rights, therefore, should be understood individually, communally and globally.

Priesthood and Christians are inseparable. No one can become a Christian without becoming a priest, and vice versa. Our priesthood is never something that we can keep for ourselves. It is a privilege because this is given by the grace of God so that we can access the Word directly. However, it is our duty because we are blessed for the blessing of others. This is the paradox of what Luther said, "Christians are free from all, but subject to all." Similarly, having human rights and being human are inseparable. Our human rights are essential for us to be free to fulfill our lives. Besides, human rights are the values that we share and protect in order that everyone is respected no matter who they are.

## **The Priesthood of All Believers and Human Rights**

From what we have discussed so far, we cannot say that the priesthood of all believers has nothing to do with human rights. Surely, it does not provide us a blueprint of what human rights, precise contents are, but it points to us a direction that we should go. In what follows, I am going to discuss four issues pertaining to the priesthood of all believers and human rights; namely, contingency, culture, individualism, and egotism.

Is the priesthood of all believers contingent or necessary for believers? What I mean by contingency is that it is not something vital and central. Rather it is a result that depends upon contingencies. Even though it is taken away, this does not do any damage to the believers themselves, for their Christian identity is a matter of faith in Jesus. But this does not lead to the conclusion that universal priesthood is contingent, because universal priesthood is something given ontologically, whether it is allowed realized externally or not. On the other hand, what I mean by necessity is that it is something vital and essential. It cannot be wiped out, because it shapes and gives life to the reality. Put concretely, priesthood is not something added upon the believers, but it is part of them. It cannot be separated from believers. Otherwise, they are no longer Christians, for Christians are not simply defined by believing in Jesus, but by carrying out the work of Jesus, namely, priesthood. For me, universal priesthood is necessary, not because it is about a "check and balance" between clergy and laity, but because it is the meaning and significance of being Christian. Only when Christians realize that they have the priesthood, do they understand their responsibility towards God, their neighbors and themselves. Otherwise, they are Christians like salt without taste. Therefore, I believe that one's priesthood cannot be deprived by any authority, for any reason. Surely, some Christians may not rightly exercise their priesthood, but this can never be a reason to take away their priesthood. Rather it is always a matter of teaching and education.

In terms of human rights, is it something contingent or necessary? From what we have discussed, I unreservedly believe that human rights are something necessary, not contingent. It is part of our nature of being humans. It defines who we are, and also teaches us how to be humans, because human rights function to protect values that are basic and fundamental to our lives. These are values that help us fulfill our

potentialities, and values through which we learn to show respect to others. It is always a tragedy when the rights of humans are deprived for the reason that they are supposedly unable to exercise their rights due to illiteracy and poverty. And exactly because they are not able to exercise their rights and do not know how to protect their rights, it is always our responsibility to protect their rights from being abused. Our commitment to the protection of human rights is our commitment to the protection of human lives, for the nature of human lives cannot be separated from human rights.

From the discussion of the first point, we realize that the universal priesthood is a right that includes a claim and a duty. It is a claim because it is something given to us by God. No one is entitled to my right. But also it is a duty because without a corresponding duty, our claim will not be protected. Therefore, in order to protect our claim, a corresponding duty is required. But this claim should be a legitimate claim. Otherwise, our claim would not generate a corresponding duty. I find this clarification very helpful to our understanding of human rights. The concept of human rights is sometimes criticized as too self-centred, because it is concerned about the rights of an individual human. This cannot be denied. But as I said, a right should include a claim and a duty. A legitimate claim requires a corresponding duty, and a duty is to respect a claim. Therefore, human rights should not be one-sidedly considered a promotion of individualism, because when we make a claim, and a corresponding duty follows. This duty is not only applied to others, but also to ourselves. Perhaps, the issue is not whether human rights can be misused (every good thing can be abused), but rather whether it is rightly explained. Besides, it is still possible to say that a right is respected when the person who has the duty actually acts in accordance with that duty. So, to respect a right can plausibly be articulated in terms of acting in accordance with demands set by the prior recognition of there being a right, that is, to respect a right can be articulated in terms of making sure that the duties internal to the concept are acted upon. Thus, when we say that you must respect her rights, we can be saying that you must act upon the duty that is correlated with her legitimate claim. In light of this, human rights can be understood very positively.

The concept of the priesthood of all believers is concerned with universality, and it not culture-bound. I think that this idea is fully explored in the above discussion. At the time of Luther, the universal

priesthood is not understood in a cultural sense, but is applied everywhere. Surely, culture can be a factor determining the shape of priesthood, but it would not change the concept of the universal priesthood. In other words, the contents and the expression of priesthood may be varied in accordance with time and space, but the concept of universal priesthood remains the same. How is this related to our understanding of human rights? In 1993, twenty six Asian countries made the *Bangkok Declaration on human rights*.<sup>15</sup> One of the controversial themes in this declaration is the culture-boundedness of human rights. It states "(to) recognize that while human rights are universal in nature, they must be considered in the context of a dynamic and evolving process of international norm-setting, bearing in mind the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds."<sup>16</sup> What it argues is that human rights is not a universal concept. It carries different meaning and contents in different parts of the world. Therefore, the Chinese have their own understanding and interpretation of human rights, and the Americans have their own. It is both unnecessary and impossible to have a standard account of human rights. Such kind of understanding of human rights easily leads to a kind of relativism (a sign of postmodernism). One of the characteristics of relativism is that there is no standard, and each one of us can speak from our own perspective. And no perspective can be challenged, because each perspective is valid to itself.

I am very puzzled with this understanding, not necessarily because I am against pluralism. But pluralism does not mean that everyone can justify his/her view by referring to himself/herself. Rather pluralism is a way of understanding and a kind of attitude, namely, openness. Besides, who are those people supporting the culture-boundedness of human rights? Is their argument reflecting that the advocates respect cultures of different countries or is this an excuse used by the government to control the people? It seems to me that the whole argument of culture-boundedness of human rights is primarily not a cultural issue, but a political issue. What I mean is that if it is a cultural issue, the concern will be how the insight of one culture enriches our understanding of human rights. Or what negative aspect of one's culture should be given

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Davis, *Human Rights and Chinese Values* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1995), 205-209.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Davis, *Human Rights and Chinese Values*, 206.

up in the light of the challenge of another culture. Nevertheless, this is not the concern of the proponents of the culture-bound theory. What they are concerned about is to use culture as a justification for their own interpretation of human rights. Furthermore, they use this as a protection against criticism, because any criticism from outside is identified as an act of "imperialism" and "colonialism." It is true that each country has its unique concern so that it may have different emphases on different aspects of human rights. This cannot be denied, because human rights are not simply an ideal, but should be something put into practice. Therefore, I have no difficulty in understanding some countries that emphasize the priority of the right of survival. But it is a result of a time of emergency rather than a cultural factor. More importantly, this should not be used as a self-defense for one's violation of human rights, and an excuse for delaying the implementation of human rights.

Finally, the universal priesthood is concerned about the welfare of the community as well as the welfare of an individual. When St. Peter is talking about the priesthood, he is addressing the Christian community as a whole. He uses words like kingdom and nation. It is about a community as a whole. Nevertheless, our understanding of priesthood comes from our understanding of an individual priest. Therefore, an individual priesthood should not be dissolved in the communal priesthood. Universal priesthood is always communal and personal. The priest as a person and a community is asked to pray for the world and bring the world towards God. In terms of human rights, one cannot deny that social rights are as important as individual rights. It is hard to imagine that a person can enjoy his civil rights without having food to eat. The *Bangkok Declaration* is right to "reaffirm the interdependence and indivisibility of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights, and the need to give equal emphasis to all categories of human rights."<sup>17</sup>

But how do we give an equal emphasis to public good and the good of individuals? When we speak of the public majority, we refer to the majority of individuals in the public, not to some abstract entity existing apart from the individuals comprising this majority. Similarly, the public good may be thought of as the sum of the good of individuals who are members of the public in question. Therefore, any denial of the good of individuals is a betrayal of the public good. Without a

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<sup>17</sup> Michael Davis, *Human Rights and Chinese Values*, 207.

respect to the good of individuals, there is no public good. But in order to achieve the common good, sometimes the good of individuals has to be given up. This paradox, I believe, is the most difficult task of any government. Perhaps, this is the difference between democratic governments and socialist governments. If we say that the democratic governments represent those who take civil and political rights seriously, then the socialist governments represent those who take social and economic rights seriously. We could not see how these two cannot be co-existent. In fact, we have to give up the political ideologies during the Cold War in 1950s and 1960s. The welfare of the people should be our fundamental concern.

Our understanding of the priesthood of all believers does not give us a blueprint of what the content of human rights should be, but it properly helps us to clarify some ambiguities in the discussion of human rights. I realize that my proposal cannot be considered a revelation from God, but I suggest that if we accept the universal priesthood, I do not see any difficulty in accepting human rights as universal rather than cultural, necessary rather than contingent. Nevertheless, like the priesthood, human rights is not only a philosophical concept, but rather it is about the daily life of the people. In other words, it is not enough to know what human rights is, but also it is essential to live up to it. To live up to it means that on the one hand, we should strive for the protection of human rights, and on the other, we should rightly exercise the rights we have. Here, I find the idea of the priesthood can inspire our thinking in this area. In what follows, I will turn to look for the meaning of the church as a priest for society. To look for the meaning of the church as a priest instead of a Christian is because it reminds us that the respect and/or struggle for human rights does not only rest in an individual level, but also in a communal level. Besides, the church here is understood as a symbol of Christians as a whole.

### **A Search for the Meaning of the Church as a Priest for Society**

We know that the church is not a political organization even though its existence has political meaning and significance. The church is always a church of Jesus Christ. It is a religious order. But this order is not transcendent, staying away from humanity, but it is immanent in human history. This is the meaning of incarnation. Like Jesus, the church is sent to the world to bear witness to the grace of God. Therefore, when

the church is making a political appeal, this does not mean that the church has political ambition. Rather its appeal is something coming out from its faith in God and its love to God. This is the faith and love motivating it to live for others, and demanding that it takes a political stand. Such kind of theological exposition has no intention to justify or theologize any political act of the church. But without such an understanding of the nature of the church, we would either privatize or politicize our Christian faith.

As a priest for society, the first responsibility of the church is to heal those who are wounded and victimized. This is a ministry of solidarity and charity. Solidarity means more than just standing with the victims, but sharing the same walk of life with them. It is a solidarity being "of " the people. In order to maintain solidarity with the people, the church should not be satisfied when its religious freedom is guaranteed by the government, while the civil and political rights of the people are denied. The church should not feel happy when its privileges are maintained, while the rights of other religious groups are violated. Solidarity means that the church should consider religious freedom within the context of human rights. Any violation of any aspect of human rights is a violation of "religious" right, and vice versa. In fact, the church does not have its own particular right, but it only shares the rights of humans. Therefore, the ministry of solidarity brings the dignity of the people and the church together along with their suffering.

Without giving up its own privilege and safety, the church cannot be a priest. In order to do this, the church has to carry out the ministry of charity. Charity is not mere humanitarian aid, but rather its aid commits it at a deeper level than that of mere giving and becomes an ongoing process, not a contribution. Put concretely, the church should commit itself to visit and pray for the prisoners of conscience and their families, to provide home to abused women and children and the homeless, to provide treatment and rehabilitation to those who are enslaved by drugs and alcohol, and to care for those who do not care themselves. This is exactly what Jesus teaches us in Matthew 25:31-46. Such compassionate action is vital, because it brings life to the community. Put strongly, these compassionate acts are the eschatological signs of the Kingdom of God (Lk.7:18-23).

As a priest for society, the church has a responsibility to help the people realize that they themselves are the priests, so that they can in



turn be the priests for others This is a matter of conscientization.<sup>18</sup> The great difficulty in helping people realize that they themselves are the priests is that they do not believe that they are the priests. Put differently, the great obstacle to human rights is that the people do not believe that they have rights. This is especially true in Asia. Due to our traditions (normally the patriarch ideology), the type of governments (totalitarian), and widespread illiteracy, the Asian people are trained to be submissive and obedient. They seldom consider that they themselves are the government. Rather they just take the reality as it is. They do not expect that they can actively bring any transformation to the reality, but they just wait for the coming "Messiah," a good king. This kind of mentality, on the one hand, strengthens the domination of the ruling regime, and on the other, it weakens the power of the people. Conscientization is to break up this false conscience. Conscientization is a way of helping people become aware of their value and rights. Furthermore, it is also a way of helping people to live a responsible life. Needless to say, conscientization is to transform the world. This is the task of the church as a priest helping people to realize that they are created in the image of God and each one of us is called to the priesthood.

Conscientization is both a designed program and a way of life. What I mean is that the church cannot carry out a program for the awareness of human rights without respecting human rights within the church. Nevertheless, the totalitarian governments know the "danger" of conscientization. This is why they try to control education. They promote indoctrination rather than conscientization. An example of this is the political education. It attempts to weaken the power of critique of the people. More importantly, it deepens the false and distorted consciousness. As a priest for society and based on its historical experience of struggle for the universal priesthood, the church must commit itself to the process of conscientization, for it is the way of helping people being accountable. We all know that it may take ages to succeed and/or cause conflict with the dominated power during the process of conscientization, but only when the people realize their rights, can they be capable to fulfill their mission on earth.

As a priest for society, the responsibility of the church is to carry out the ministry of reconciliation. What is reconciliation? Fundamentally,

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<sup>18</sup> See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988), 69.

reconciliation should never be a cheap accommodation. Nor is reconciliation a way of avoiding conflict. From Matthew 18:15-17, we notice that a ministry of reconciliation involves three things, namely, the courage to speak out, the removal of hatred, and the willingness to confront. Firstly, this passage talks about the importance of mutual understanding between the sinner and the "sinned against". Sometimes, the sinner does not know that he/she hurts people. This is why the sinned against has to come to the sinner and point out his sin. This demands a courage from the sinned against to speak out. Courage to speak out is always difficult for the victims, not only because the public shows curiosity more than empathy towards them, but also because they are threatened by the sinful power. Courage to speak out is the first step towards reconciliation. The role of the church as a priest is to encourage the victim to speak out, and sometimes speak for the unspeakable.

Secondly, this passage is about the removal of hatred and the practice of forgiveness. It is not hatred that moves the sinned against to encounter the sinner, but rather it is forgiveness and love. He, therefore, encounters the sinner not for the sake of revenge, but rather in the hope of receiving him as a brother. Apparently, it may be reasonable that the sinned against has the "right" to condemn or take revenge, because he is the person being sinned against. As observers, we do not have the right to criticize their hatred, because we have no direct experience of being sinned-against. But we all know that hatred eventually generates further hatred. As a result, the spiral of violence begins. This is exactly why Jesus emphasizes the importance of forgiveness (Matt. 19:21-22). Therefore, forgiveness requires the discipline to cope with our hatred properly. Also, forgiveness arises from the knowledge that we are sinners as well (see the Lord's prayer). Forgiveness is not a weak act, but a strong one, because it depends upon love, not physical power. This is exactly the role of the church as a priest for society, namely, promoting forgiveness. I know that this role may not be welcome by the victims or may be criticized as cowardly, but this is the teaching of our Lord Jesus. We know that the victims have to be sympathized with, but this does not justify that they can do anything they like.

Thirdly, in this passage, the sinned against does not only speak out and practise forgiveness, but also moves to confrontation. That is, he demands repentance from the sinner. Forgiveness does not take place without anything happening beforehand. Therefore, forgiveness leads

to confrontation so that wrong-doing is named, challenged and discarded, for it is a costly forgiveness. Our forgiveness demands others to confess their wrong acts. Otherwise, no reconciliation is possible. Forgiveness does not allow the sinner to continue to hurt other people. Otherwise, it is not forgiveness, but compromise. Reconciliation is always militant, because it is basically confrontational. The church has a ministry of reconciliation to help people to be brothers and sisters again. But the church should not be afraid of pointing out the sin and violence of any institution, and calling it to repent. Otherwise, any reconciliation is an illusion.

As a priest for society, the church has a responsibility to unmask the idols and denounce them, so that the people can come to worship God. What are the idols today? Idols are the powers that replace God as our objects of fear and love. In Hong Kong, the idol is commercialization.<sup>19</sup> One of the characteristics of commercialization is to regard everything as a product to sell or buy. This means that everything has a price. If you can pay the price, you will get it. For instance, stamp-collecting is no longer a hobby in the eyes of the people of Hong Kong, for it becomes a trading business.<sup>20</sup> This applies to everything, and everything in society has a value in terms of money. As a result, our society becomes money-minded and materialized. More importantly, we lose a sense of worthiness in terms of goodness and aesthetics. Besides, in a commercial world, every product needs to be decorated and advertised. My concern is to what extent human beings are reduced to being commodities (i.e. beauty contest), human relationships are advertised as objects for sale (i.e. the best mother contest), and charitable functions are decorated as a ball (i.e. fundraising by the charities). The idol of commercialization has to be named and denounced.

Apart from this, we face another idol, namely, an idol of patriotism.<sup>21</sup> Patriotism is something alien to the people of Hong Kong. Having been

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<sup>19</sup> See Kung Lap Yan, "The Cultural Dimension of Liberation Theology: The Case of Hong Kong," *Ching Feng* 38 (1995), 213-26.

<sup>20</sup> This is a very special phenomenon in Hong Kong. A lot of people spend thousands of dollars to buy the newly-issued stamps, for they consider that their value will increase. It is not the hobby that matters, but the value in terms of money that matters. On the other hand, the Post Office earns a lot from this, and as a result, it declares to delay the postage's adjustment.

<sup>21</sup> Kung Lap Yan, "Love Your God and Love Your Country: An Ethical Discussion," *Christian Times* (6.1996).

colonized for more than a hundred years, and having experienced the history of China, the people of Hong Kong have gradually lost a sense of patriotism. We claim that we are Chinese, but we cannot identify ourselves with the fate of China, because we are shocked by the history of China. Certainly, it takes time to heal our wounds. Nevertheless, patriotism now becomes a political ideology. Patriotism is interpreted as loyalty and obedience to the Communist Party. Any critique of the Party is taken to be unpatriotic. On the other hand, when you show obedience to the Party, you will be considered patriotic, and you may get support from the State. This is exactly why some people suddenly become patriotic, and many people become silent about the wrongdoing of the government. The church as a priest for society, should have the courage to unmask any idol that prevents people from worshipping God. This may not be a service welcomed by the society in general, but this is the duty of a priest.

Finally, as a priest for society, the church has a responsibility to bring people to Jesus Christ. This is not only a matter of evangelism, but also an eschatological concern. We have to know that even though all humanitarian works are good and essential, they are not the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God cannot be achieved by human acts. Rather it is something brought by God alone. Besides, we have to know that although political liberation can bring freedom to humans, real freedom comes from one's conversion to Christ. However, this does not mean that the church should do nothing socially, and simply concentrate on converting individuals. Rather, the eschatological nature of the kingdom of God always serves as a reference to challenge our society, and as a motivation to move us to realize the demands of the Kingdom of God.

From what we have discussed so far, we can say that human rights is not only concerned about what it is, but also about how these rights are rightly exercised and respected. Our understanding of priesthood tells us that human rights is rightly exercised and respected only when it is seen as a privilege of responsibility towards those whose rights are denied and suppressed. For the sake of the rights of others, our understanding of priesthood requires that we may give in our own rights, not because human rights can be disposable, but because this brings us to fulfilment. As said, human rights is importance, because it is a necessary means for helping one to fulfill one's calling on earth.

Christian understanding of priesthood then displays a possible respect and practice of human rights.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to explain that Christian support in human rights is due to our understanding of and commitment to the universal priesthood. Christian understanding of the universal priesthood argues that our rights are given by God, not simply something in-born. To believe that our rights are given by God does not necessarily mean that humans become less important. Rather because our rights are given by God so that no one can deprive our rights. To respect human rights is to respect God, and vice versa. Besides, Christian experience of the struggle for the universal priesthood is an example of the struggle for self-governing. Christians need the church as well as people need the state to protect our interest and enhance our benefits, but these institutions are not independent from the people and absolute in themselves. Rather they are always the agents of the people, and the people are the real government. However, sometimes when the concept of human rights is criticized as a form of liberalism, the concept of the universal priesthood can balance the individualistic and egoistic tendency resulting from the one-sided understanding of human rights. For Christians, the importance of priesthood is not simply a privilege, but is always a status helping us to fulfil God's will on us, namely, being priests for others. In order to enable human rights to be respected, democratization is a must. Reinhold Niebuhr once said, "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, Christian support of democracy would require another paper to discuss.

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how human rights is understood in terms of Christian belief and practice of the universal priesthood. Our belief of the universal priesthood reveals that human rights is something necessary for one to learn to be humane rather than an excuse to protect one's self-interest. Besides, through the example of the church as a priest of society, we do not only learn that human rights is granted by God, but also how it is rightly exercised. In this paper, issues like universality

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<sup>22</sup> R.Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (London: Nisbet, 1945), vi.

versus culture-bound of human rights, and individual's right versus community's right are discussed in the light of the concept of the universal priesthood.

## 撮 要

本文目的是要嘗試以基督教信徒皆祭司的觀念來討論人權。信徒皆祭司對人權討論的重要性，在於它指出人權的必須性是它幫助我們實現人性，而藉著教會作為社會祭司的榜樣，我們學懂如何正確地實踐上帝賦予人類的權利與義務。此外，本文亦探討有關人權的普世性或文化限制性、個人權利與群體權利等問題。