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HUMAN DIGNITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM Buddhist and Christian Perspectives

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The question of how the concept of human rights – so crucially important for the implementation of justice in a rapidly globalising world – relates to the plurality of cultures and religions has still not been solved. Controversies such as those over ‘land rights’ in Aboriginal Australia and ‘Asian values’ in Southeast Asia have shown this repeatedly. In such cases discussion eventually becomes focused on the ‘universality’ of human rights, not just the global scope of the idea itself but the universal validity of catalogues of specific rights such as those contained in the United Nations’ *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (10 December 1948). There is something arbitrary and unsystematic about such charters, as is shown by the rather different emphases in the African and Islamic documents which were meant to correct the UN’s *lack of universality*.¹ But if, in attempting to explore this problem seriously, one appears to tamper with the principle of universality, one can easily be accused of diluting the ethical force of human rights by questioning their applicability to every human being without exception. Nothing could be further from my mind, so before explaining what I wish to do in this paper may I first set out some presuppositions which I take to be axiomatic:

1. Our starting point is the dignity of the human, the unique value of each individual human life as a world constituted by consciousness, an originating source of free acts, which is therefore an end in itself and must never be misused as a means to other people’s ends.² This principle is reflected in formulations such as *dignitas humana* in the social teaching of the Catholic Church, which goes back to the biblical doctrine of the creation of human beings in the image of God; or in the unique status of the human being in the Buddhist scale of existence, on which neither animals nor gods but only humans are in a position to grasp the reality of their situation and strive for definitive release from the chain of becoming; hence the severity of the prohibition on taking human life as the third of the four cardinal offences (*pâ rājika*).³
2. The concept of ‘human rights’ is *one way* of acknowledging this unique moral status of human dignity, in that rights accrue to the individual person simply by virtue of his or her being rational, autonomous and free. To this extent human rights language belongs within the Western tradition of liberal discourse, which lies at the heart of Western democracies and was profoundly influenced by Christianity. Conceptions of what it is that makes the human

¹ The ‘Banjul Charter’, *The African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights*, adopted by the OAU in Nairobi in 1981, stresses the integration of the individual into society, the rights of peoples and duties towards family, state and international community; text in *Catholic International*, July 1991, 631-632.

² There is no space here to discuss the ethical problems posed by the status of embryos, fetuses, the profoundly handicapped and those in terminal comas.

³ See *Pârājika III, Suttavibhanga* of the *Vinaya-Pitaka*, where the teaching arises from a case of incitement to suicide and goes on to cover all forms of unlawful killing including abortion, III.17.

uniquely valuable, however, are very differently constructed in different cultural and religious traditions.⁴

3. What rights language tries to express in the conceptual framework provided by European culture has universal validity, though it is otherwise expressed in other cultures, e.g. in terms of ‘duty’, ‘obedience’, ‘taboo’ etc. Problematic as it is in the context of postmodern discourse, the sameness-in-difference of the human as the criterion for rights *everywhere and without exception* is a categorical imperative on which the effectiveness of human rights as an instrument of justice depends.
4. Conceptions of universality, however, may themselves be culturally determined and usually arise in contexts of domination: what is taken to be ‘universally valid’ is often *somebody’s particular* version of the truth of things which by virtue of a claim to universality is then imposed on others as ‘the’ truth. Such conceptions are necessarily generalisations, whereas the moral impulse arises in the face-to-face encounter with the alien, unexpected and unwanted ‘other’, as Levinas has shown.
5. ‘Universality’ is thus not available *a priori* but remains implicit in the intersubjectivity of human interaction until it is ‘realised’ through shared practice and the negotiation of meanings; this applies all the more to interactions between religions and across cultures.⁵
6. Rights language, though a powerful instrument for the implementation of justice, is thus incomplete unless its Western (and Christian) conceptual presuppositions are complemented by the metaphors, stories and ideas supplied by other cultures. Once this begins to happen, and in the light of growing ecological awareness, we realise that the concept of rights has to be expanded to include nature itself, not only all sentient beings but species as well, within the scope of justice. Care for cultures – our own and those of others – and care for ecologies – both local and global – are seen to form part of one overarching ethical purpose.

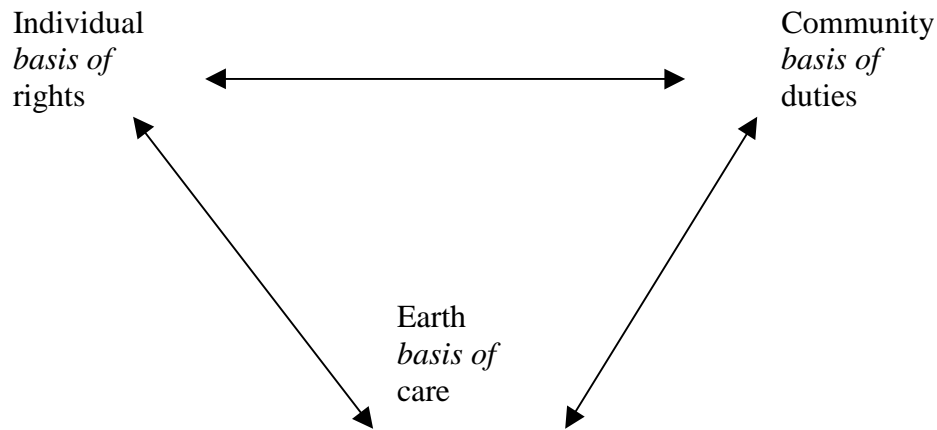
It should be clear by now that in this paper I intend to argue *for* human dignity and human rights as universal values. But as Karl Popper used to say about scientific theories, when we think we have a good one we should not try to protect it from criticism and possible refutation – which is in fact what scholars, like scientists, mostly do – but to test it in every conceivable way, because it is in discovering how it could be falsified that we provide the best warrant for its provisional truth.⁶ Something like this is my purpose here. Rights language, I have been assured by

⁴ See Linda Hogan and J.D. May, “Constructing the Human: Dignity in Interreligious Dialogue”, Regina Ammicht-Quinn, Maureen Junker-Kenny, Elsa Tamez, eds., *The Discourse of Human Dignity* (London: SCM, *Concilium* 2003/2), 78-89; and, on the evolution of moral terminology in the West, Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2000).

⁵ See J.D. May, “Verantwortung *Coram Deo*? Europa zwischen säkularer und interreligiöser Ethik”, Karl-Wilhelm Merks, ed., *Verantwortung – Ende oder Wandlungen einer Vorstellung? Orte und Funktionen der Ethik in unserer Gesellschaft* (Münster-Hamburg-London: LIT Verlag, 2001), 193-207.

⁶ See Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, [1963] 1974).

social activists in the Asia-Pacific, is the sharpest instrument they have for combating authoritarian regimes and economic injustice; but it is alien to many cultures in the region and its imposition can have the paradoxical effect of suggesting domination rather than liberation.⁷ Though it is somewhat over-simplified, the following schema sets out the terms in which I wish to discuss the problem:



This is not to suggest that ‘individual rights’ are an exclusively Western notion, whereas less developed cultures are content with ‘community duties’, nor that ‘ecological care’ is characteristic only of indigenous peoples. In Thai Buddhism, to take one example, the ‘dhammic democracy’ proposed by Phra Prayudh Payutto argues for individual freedoms, both political and economic, whereas the ‘dhammic socialism’ of Buddhadasa Bhikkhu extols the ethical value of community responsibility.⁸ Similarly, the social ethics proposed by the Christian ecumenical movement through the World Council of Churches has had to struggle to get beyond its somewhat individualistic base in liberal Protestantism, while the social teaching of the Catholic Church, though ever wary of anything that could be construed as socialism, has always taken its stand on the duties and obligations arising from the ‘common good’ of all members of society and has articulated the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity.⁹ What I wish to suggest is that we must carry out *three sets of mediations*, indicated by the arrows in the diagram, if both the strengths and limitations of ‘rights’ language are to be appreciated.

The relationship between individual and community might seem to be reciprocal, in that communities consist of individuals and individuals only achieve individuality within communities. We must remember, however, that in cultures like those of Pacific Islanders, though striking individual ‘characters’ emerge (think of the *bikman* of Melanesia!), the sense in which they are ‘individuals’ is quite different from that

⁷ See J.D. May, “‘Rights of the Earth’ and ‘Care for the Earth’: Two Paradigms for a Buddhist-Christian Ecological Ethic”, *Horizons* 21 (1994), 48-61.

⁸ See Sallie King, “From Is to Ought: Natural Law in Buddhadasa Bhikkhu and Phra Prayudh Payutto”, *Journal of Religious Ethics* 30 (2002), 275-293, 288-290, and Soraj Hongladarom, “Buddhism and Human Rights in the Thoughts of Sulak Sivaraksa and Phra Dhammpidok (Prayudh Prayutto)”, Damien Keown, Charles Prebish and Wayne Husted, eds., *Buddhism and Human Rights* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1998), 97-109.

⁹ See the interesting comparison by Charles Strain, “Socially Engaged Buddhism’s Contribution to the Transformation of Catholic Social Teaching on Human Rights”, Keown *et al.*, *Buddhism and Human Rights*, 155-174.

inculcated by Western education.¹⁰ The relationship between rights and duties is even less clearly complementary. It is self-evident that, once rights are established, whether as claims to something that is due or as freedoms from something that is unjust, these entail duties on the part of others, whereas the inference does not necessarily hold the other way round: it is not so evident that duties, obligations or responsibilities in the context of community harmony and social cooperation entail rights on the part of those to whom these duties are owed. It has been argued, for instance, that there is not even an “embryonic” concept of rights in traditional Buddhism and that the social relevance of Buddhist compassion stands out all the more clearly in consequence.¹¹ Compassion is far more fundamental than rights, and it only becomes necessary to insist on rights when the practice of compassion declines.¹²

The role of ecology in both Buddhist and Christian ethics and their human rights discourses is a larger topic which complicates matters still further. The potent combination of population growth and technological advancement is sufficient indication of both the human rights issues (family limitation, abortion) and the environmental devastation involved in, say, providing every family in China with an automobile and an air conditioner. But in my view the ecological dimension could be crucial in bringing about the necessary mediations outlined in the diagram above. Buddhism, conceived entirely within the worldview defined by *karman-samsâra*, the endless cycle of rebirth according to the residue of deeds in previous lives, sees human life as an integral part of this perpetual flux of life forms. Its relationship with the rest of sentient nature is thus one of constant ‘recycling’ until radical release (*moksha*) is achieved in *nirvana*. For this reason the ancient Indian unwillingness to harm any sentient being (*ahimsâ*) is an integral part of Buddhist ethics. This does not mean that Buddhism has a ready-made ecological ethic for today, but it is a promising starting point. Christianity, on the other hand, was so preoccupied with human sin and redemption that it reduced nature to the exemplar of ‘natural law’ as it applied to humans and lost sight of care for creation as an ethical goal, so that the idea that nature could have ‘rights’ or that ecology could be a matter of justice now seems incomprehensible.¹³ This is as much an indication of the limitations of rights language in expressing a universal ethic as it is of Christianity’s tendency to be individualistic and anthropocentric. Both Buddhist and Christian traditions, I shall argue below,

¹⁰ See J.D. May, “Education as Initiation? Some South Pacific Perspectives”, *Journal of Religious Education* 50/2 (2002), 45-52.

¹¹ See the discussion in Keown *et al.*, *Buddhism and Human Rights*, between Damien Keown, “Are There Human Rights in Buddhism?”, 15-41, and Craig Ihara, “Why There Are No Rights in Buddhism: A Reply to Damien Keown”, 43-51, where Keown distinguishes between claim-rights and liberty-rights, 19, and suggests that the term ‘due’ comes closest to Buddhist terms which conflate rights and duties, while Ihara rejects the notion that duties invariably entail corresponding rights, 45, and suggests that Buddhist ethics would be better off without the concept of rights, 51, n. 21. See also the discussion in Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “Buddhism and the Human Rights Idea: Resonances and Dissonances”, unpubl. Ms., who comes down on the side of Ihara, 7-8.

¹² This case is argued in the same volume by Jay Garfield, “Human Rights and Compassion”, Keown *et al.*, 111-140.

¹³ See Roderick Frazier Nash, *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 17: “After the decline of Greece and Rome and the advent of Christianity, nature did not fare well in Western ethics”; James A. Nash, *Loving Nature: Ecological Integrity and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991); and my discussion in J.D. May, *After Pluralism: Towards an Interreligious Ethic* (Münster-Hamburg-London: LIT Verlag, 2000), 133-137, 139-144. Most of us are capable of carrying on an extended discussion of ‘religion and violence’ without even mentioning animals!

could benefit from their encounters with the ‘primal’ traditions of indigenous peoples in developing new attitudes to ‘nature’.

When ‘primal’ traditions, oral cultures without scriptures and philosophies but with close bonds to land and nature, are affected by ‘progress’, ‘development’ and ‘globalisation’, the universality of rights language becomes dubious, because it is precisely the ‘universality’ of Western norms that is invoked to justify such interventions. The concept of universality demands more discussion than we can give it here, but it is closely bound up with the mind’s capacity for abstraction and generalisation. This is a powerful tool of science, but no matter how much it is refined it leads us further away from the ethical issues we wish to consider here, which are at one and the same time concrete and transcendent (in Levinas’s terms: the ‘infinity’ disclosed in the ethical encounter can never be reduced to ‘totality’). This observation becomes relevant when we turn to the purportedly ‘universal’ religions. It is important to realise that primal traditions are not simply ‘outside’ the spheres of influence of the ‘universal’ religions unless they are touched by them in missionary contexts. Rather, primal traditions form the social and cultural media through which the so-called ‘world’ religions take on historical shape and articulate themselves in *any* context; conversely, there is a sense in which Aboriginal, Jewish or Japanese religion, though ethnic and bound to land and place, are ‘world’ religion.¹⁴ The problem is that, having achieved a distinctive historical identity in a few defining instances – the Theravâda Buddhism of Southeast Asia and the Orthodox Christianity of Eastern Europe are striking examples – the universalist religions tend to make these ‘inculturations’ normative and claim timeless and universal validity for them. We thus find the customs of the Himalayas, the Byzantine court or the Arabian desert being imposed as religious duties on Buddhists, Christians and Muslims in markedly different contexts. These particular (*sit venia verbi*) ‘samsarisations’, ‘incarnations’ or ‘inscriptions’ of traditions which claim universal validity could have turned out otherwise, but their particularity is the indispensable accompaniment of historical existence. This realisation further complicates the problem of the universality of rights discourse in interesting ways.

In order to systematise these differences somewhat I have found it helpful to speak in terms of at least two basic types of traditions. There are religions which might be called ‘metacosmic’, because they reckon in one way or another with a transcendence in the light of which the ‘phenomenal’ world of perception and experience appears to be contingent at its core, whether the context be *creatio ex nihilo* or the dependent co-arising of all constituents of existence (*paticcasamuppâda*). At the other end of this scale there are the myriad traditions of indigenous peoples the world over, which might appropriately be called ‘biocosmic’ in that they find whatever is of ultimate significance to them immanent within the natural rhythms of the cosmos and the physical processes by which life is propagated and sustained.¹⁵ The cultures of the Pacific Islands, particularly Melanesia, provide numerous examples. At various points in between we might locate traditions such as Daoism or Shintô, which derive wisdom for living from identification with the balance of cosmic forces (*yin* and *yang* in

¹⁴ See, for example, David Turner, “Aboriginal Religion as World Religion: An Assessment”, *Studies in World Christianity* 2 (1996), 77-96.

¹⁵ I take the former term from the Sri Lankan liberation theologian Aloysius Pieris and the latter from the Italian missiologist Ennio Mantovani; see J.D. May, *Transcendence and Violence: The Encounter of Buddhist, Christian and Primal Traditions* (New York-London: Continuum, 2003), 58.

Chinese religion or the ‘Three Principles’ represented by salt, water and rice; star, moon and sun; or sword, jewel and mirror in Japan¹⁶) and could therefore be called ‘sapiential’.

In the Hebrew Bible we can find examples of all of these types of religion; none of them is hard and fast, but all can interact and – the salient point for our present reflections – each can enrich and strengthen the others. The point is worth making, however, that ‘metacosmic’ traditions such as Buddhism and Christianity are in danger of becoming abstract and absolutist unless they are continually ‘earthed’ in the ‘biocosmic’ traditions of primal religion. This process has happened over and over again in the course of their respective histories, but it can easily stagnate, leaving an inheritance of petrified rituals and institutions whose significance as expressions of the traditions’ defining ideas is no longer reflected upon but whose ‘universality’ is taken for granted. The problem was classically formulated by Ernst Troeltsch as that of the relationship between norms and history: precisely as normative, ethical principles and religious doctrines demonstrate a certain *a priori* necessity that transcends the contingency of their historical origins; yet such norms are themselves the products of history, humanly constructed and subject to modification each time they are redefined in new cultural contexts and historical circumstances. The problem is merely compounded when divine revelation is invoked to legitimate such principles, as when *lex natura*, though intelligible to human reason, is corroborated by *lex divina* in traditional Catholic moral theology.

Human rights language is undeniably Western, unable to conceal its origins in the legal categories inherited from Greece and Rome.¹⁷ So conceived, it is an abstract universal which is logically independent of the myths and doctrines in which the various religions seek to found the unique worth of human nature. The concept of human rights, though at home in the Western liberal context of individual autonomy and political freedoms, is for this reason communicable to cultures that construct the human differently. The Dalai Lama, for example, has no problem endorsing human rights as a means of obtaining justice while insisting on the priority of wisdom and compassion, and, though they initially resisted human rights as ‘liberal’, neither do the popes in their social teaching.¹⁸ The question is: in what categories and under what conditions is the concept of human rights communicable across cultures? Certainly not those of the assumed superiority of Western ideas and values and their imposition on others by force, as has happened often enough in the colonial and missionary past of Western Christianity. The recognition of differences in the mythical foundations of human dignity does not imply that the various ‘stories’ are functionally equivalent and may be substituted for one another or combined at will to reinforce an account of the human that is already given *a priori*. It is the human itself that is differently constructed, and the Western construct is one amongst others.

Thus the powerful myth of creation by the Word of God and in the image of God, common to all three Abrahamic faiths, emphasises the inalienable uniqueness of each

¹⁶ See Guji Yukitaka Yamamoto, *Kami No Michi, The Way of the Kami: The Life and Thought of a Shinto Priest* (Stockton, CA: Tsubaki America, 1987), 94.

¹⁷ See Raimon Panikkar, “Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?”, *Invisible Harmony: Essays on Contemplation and Responsibility* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 109-133.

¹⁸ See the essays by Garfield and Strain in Keown *et al.*, *Buddhism and Human Rights*, referred to above (nn. 8, 12).

human being and the irrevocable consequences of each and every act of free will. In the cosmic mythic complex of indigenous cultures such as those of Aboriginal Australia or Melanesia, by contrast, the human is an integral part of physical nature as represented in myths and rituals that stress belonging to the comprehensive 'meta-community' of kinship, ancestors and nature spirits rather than individual uniqueness. When Aboriginals become Christians, the prospect is opened up of an Aboriginal Christianity whose horizons are expanded by a universality that transcends ethnicity and locality yet which offers Western Christians the chance to confront their 'Archaic other' (David Tracy) and rediscover what it means to cherish the land as the 'place' which bestows identity and the earth as our common 'home'.¹⁹

In India, the richly symbolic concept of *dharma* connotes the obligations arising from both social and cosmic status and is less amenable to the notion of rights (*ius*); it could be said to encompass a 'cosmocentric' view of the world in which the cosmic is not necessarily subordinate to the human.²⁰ Buddhism, which appears to do away with the notion of an individual substantial self altogether (*anattâ*, the teaching that every conceivable constituent of the individual is 'not-self'), may seem to be inimical to the very idea of individualising human nature in order to provide a foundation for rights and freedoms. Yet the teaching on emptiness (*shûnyatâ*) can be construed as a radical and original way of ensuring that ego-attachment does not hinder the universal scope of compassion, thereby giving free rein to the realisation of good and the alleviation of suffering without the need for insisting on 'rights'. The Chinese, whose civilisation was already deeply imbued with the Confucian sense of family duty when it was confronted with the Buddhist teachings and monastic institutions, eventually found ways to assimilate these to the subordination of the individual to nature in Daoist mysticism and the paradigmatic importance of family ties in Confucianism. When this Sinicised Buddhism reached Japan, it may be said to have assimilated so completely to the indigenous Way of the Kami (*Shintô*) as to have compromised its identity, for the Japanese regarded Shintô as merely the formalisation of the religion of Japaneseness (*nihonjinron*) and Buddhism as that dimension of indigenous religion that relates to death and the afterlife.²¹

Each of these religious traditions, separately and in combination, gives rise to a conception of human dignity derived from a mythical account of human nature – but not necessarily emphasising individuality or expressed in terms of 'rights'. The Western 'story' of the triumph of freedom and the pre-eminence of the individual is neither unique nor self-evidently superior to those of others, though it does predominate in a world shaped by Western technology and institutions. The doctrine of unrestricted free choice, though it is directly derived from the dignity of the human and makes democratic institutions possible, turns out to be pernicious when magnified by a global economy bent on profiteering, consumerism and environmental destruction. This is a hard lesson to learn for the West: that it is now being defined by

¹⁹ See J.D. May, "Human Rights as Land Rights in the Pacific", *Pacifica* 6 (1993), 61-80, and *Transcendence and Violence*, Conclusion.

²⁰ See Francis X D'Sa, "Das Recht, ein Mensch zu sein und die Pflicht, kosmisch zu bleiben. Interkulturelle Reflexionen zu Menschenrechten und kosmischen Pflichten", Johannes Hoffmann, ed., *Begründung von Menschenrechten aus der Sicht unterschiedlicher Kulturen* (Frankfurt: Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1991), 157-185.

²¹ See Jan van Bragt, "Multiple Religious Belonging of the Japanese People", Catherine Cornille, ed., *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 7-19.

others just as it once defined them. At the same time, however, it opens up the prospect that, although we must disabuse ourselves of the notion that one culture – ours – is ‘trans-culturally’ superior to others, ‘cross-culturally’ we are not only able to communicate but morally obliged to do so for the sake of our own survival.²² But there are ethical issues involved in understanding and communication between cultures, and it is to these that I wish to turn in conclusion, because they are crucial to solving the problem of universal human rights in a situation of religious plurality.

Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism, in its wider context of post-colonial theory, has made us aware that knowledge, even in the form of scientific research and literary expression, can be a function of domination, systematically distorting perceptions of difference by cloaking attitudes of superiority and contempt under a façade of fascination with the exotic. This is only one of the ways in which the Western liberal tradition, to which, we must never forget, we owe the freedoms we enjoy, has failed the test of acknowledging otherness in all its threatening strangeness, whether it be that of race, gender, culture, religion or extra-human nature. The principle of equality is noble but abstract; in practice, arguments could always be found to justify the powerful interests of commerce and security and the equally powerful instinct of prejudice in subordinating those who were different and exploiting their resources. This is still the case, as immigration policy, the so-called ‘war on terrorism’ and the lip service paid to ecology in many countries show. Ironically, the destruction has been most ruthless where the protection of indigenous cultures coincides with the protection of the environment, in that these cultures have traditionally created balanced ecologies in which humans and nature alike can flourish. There can be no question, however, of idealising or romanticising such cultures. These abuses are just as prevalent in Asia as in the West: India, China and Japan are among the worst offenders against both human rights and nature’s rights; Thailand’s collusion with the corrupt regime in Myanmar is shameful; and Buddhism seems even more helpless than Christianity in the face of such abuses. But these are all arguments for intensifying inter-religious mutuality so that conceptions of the transcendent and conceptions of the human-in-nature can be mediated to one another.

I believe the argument can be made that the religions preserve denser accounts of how the rights of individuals, community responsibility and care for the earth can reinforce one another than the relatively thin doctrines of individual liberty and religious pluralism inherited from the liberal tradition. One of the cornerstones of this tradition was the independence of ethics from religion and the exclusion of ‘comprehensive doctrines’ of the kind propagated by religions from the public sphere of rational and pragmatic discussion.²³ Ethics and religion are logically distinguishable and in this sense ethics may be rationally constructed without reference to religion. But there are pragmatic as well as formal logics; the logic by which a doctor arrives at a diagnosis or a judge at a decision is not the same as that of formal deduction.²⁴ The logic involved in moral decisions is a ‘logic of self-involvement’ akin to that which

²² The terminology is suggested by Panikkar, “Is the Notion of Human Rights a Western Concept?”, 121.

²³ Debates such as that between John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas demonstrate both the strengths and weaknesses of the liberal tradition. In this context it is worth noting that the Buddha discouraged his followers from entertaining ‘views’ (*ditthî*, theories of the world whose truth or falsity is immaterial for the practice that leads to wisdom, *prajñâ*) and that ethics is integral to the Buddhist way of life.

²⁴ See Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).

structures religious commitment.²⁵ Historically the insight into the transcendence that is intrinsic to ethical acts occurred in religious contexts (the *Upanishads*, the Book of Ezekiel, the New Testament, the *Bhagavadgîtâ*), and the motivation to act morally was nourished by religious narratives. The normative dimension of moral decision-making, experienced in the demands of conscience and expressed in the categorical imperative, is complemented by an element of vision which need not be explicitly religious but is typically so.²⁶

Even allowing for counter-examples such as godless cultures and atheistic philanthropists, it can be shown how ethics is contextualised in narratives of comprehensive liberation and fulfilment, whether these tell stories of the 'good life' (the *gutpela sindaun* of Melanesian cultures), the peace that comes from the cooling of desire (*nirvana*), or a salvation that embraces humans and the cosmos (Rom 8:18-25). 'Universality' thus becomes a function of the 'inter-' in terms like inter-subjective, inter-cultural and inter-religious; 'equality' takes full account of irreducible human differences while pinpointing the principle of mutual respect which transcends them; 'rights' are defined to counteract the manifest inequalities introduced by domination and exploitation; and 'pluralism' can no longer be an excuse for limiting the applicability of rights and the values underlying them to exclusive groups. In such an expanded context human rights, while recognised as an indispensable instrument for achieving justice, are put in perspective alongside the much more fundamental values of love and wisdom, care and compassion.

²⁵ See Donald D. Evans, *The Logic of Self-Involvement* (New York: Herder; London: SCM, 1969).

²⁶ The point is ably argued by Robert Gascoigne, *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).