

## **Human Dignity: A Religious Appraisal**

**Marian Gh. Simion, PhD**

Harvard Divinity School

---

**ABSTRACT:** This paper represents a sketchy appraisal of human dignity from the perspective of religion, through the lenses of poverty, education, health and conflict. The author reflects on current data and on the general trends and attitudes that define what honors or dishonors a human being in the contemporary world.

**KEY WORDS:** dignity, religion, poverty, literacy, health, conflict.

---

### **The question of definition**

The logic proximity between the noun “dignity” and the auxiliary verb “to be” escorts one’s thinking to the contrast between an individual’s perception of the self, and the perception of the others. Accordingly, the simple parlance implies that “dignity” represents the opposite of “lowliness”, carrying multiple propositions related to what defines and determines the structure of a society. Synonymous with virtue of “excellence” and with the status of “nobility”, dignity recreates the persona by contrasting one’s self-perception in line with the social expectations imposed by what a group defines as

good or bad, desirable or undesirable, beautiful or ugly—in other words, *values*.

The implicit reverberations of the blending between *excellence* and *nobility*, point to a wide array of meanings encapsulated by terms such as: “address”, “cachet”, “character”, “consequence”, “courtliness”, “culture”, “decency”, “decorum”, “distinction”, “elevation”, “eminence”, “ethics”, “etiquette”, “glory”, “grace”, “grandeur”, “gravity”, “greatness”, “hauteur”, “honor”, “importance”, “loftiness”, “majesty”, “merit”, “morality”, “nobleness”, “perfection”, “poise”, “prestige”, “propriety”, “quality”, “rank”, “regard”, “renown”, “respectability”, “seemliness”, “self-respect”, “significance”, “solemnity”, “splendor”, “standing”, “state”, “stateliness”, “station”, “stature”, “status”, “sublimity”, “virtue”, “worth”, and “worthiness.”<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, the ensemble of meanings proposed by this multitude of synonyms, highlight a tight relationship between material and symbolic values. As such, the concept of dignity cannot be reasonably analyzed, except also within the multifarious encounter between the auxiliary verbs “to have” and “to be.” In fact, evolutionary biology itself demonstrates that personality is shaped by the outcome of the competition between the two auxiliary verbs.<sup>2</sup>

As it is obvious, in the general acceptance of the contemporary society, dignity is representative of the aspirations for recognition sought by the individual, and by the society; with the material values serving as a point of reference and quantification.

## **An Anthropologic Appraisal**

In shaping up the concept of dignity, religion plays a crucial role in the sense that it defines the ultimate human purpose, and the meaning of life. It also offers emotional reassurance, it generates solidarity, it establishes rules for the daily life, and it works as an element of

social control. It also fosters adaptation to new conditions of life imposed by social change.<sup>3</sup> One can credibly argue that organized religion is the predominant institution that assigns meaning and value to human life, while also reshaping cultural beliefs.

In general, from the perspective of organized religions, dignity is recognized as being an inherent right of each individual. The human being is an avatar of a deity in Hinduism; is created in God's image in Judaism; and even coexists with the divine through hypostatic union in Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> While Judaism and Christianity bestow upon the individual a superlative sense of dignity—that of being created in the image of God (B-Tselem Elohim, Imago Dei)—Islam considers that God's attributes are his alone;<sup>5</sup> yet recognizing the pre-eminence of human being above other creatures.<sup>6</sup>

## Contemporary Sociologic Realities

In its essence, religion is faith understood as trust and devotion to a community that shares a narrative about the meaning of life. While personal attributes such as education, wealth, poverty, and health reshape one's sense of dignity, religious interpretation had often been an arena where the idealized status of dignity and the struggle for survival, imposed by the harshness of life, had been negotiated. Using *theodicy* as a mechanism to maintain social control, organized religions have historically promoted ideologies of social stratification based on wealth and entitlement, such as in the Hindu cast system; have promoted social equality since “there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female” (Gal 3:28); or, on the contrary, have promised better chances in heaven because, “if our earthly house . . . were dissolved, we have a building of God . . . in the heavens.” (1 Cor 5:1.)

## Education and Literacy

The progress of civilization owes to education and literacy. Since the dawn of humanity down to civilization, education had redefined human dignity, and it will continue to do so for as long as humanity itself will exist. The ancient Greek philosophers claimed that education gives rise to freedom, and freedom generates and maintains the dignity of the individual. “For in these matters we must not believe the many, who say that free persons only ought to be educated, but we should rather believe the philosophers, who say that the educated only are free,” said Epictetus.<sup>7</sup>

Education improves the moral values of a community by reshaping its laws, customs, and the public opinion. It develops the mind, it organizes the daily life, it gives structure to labor and rest, it creates social structure. It empowers the talented to develop new skills, to expand vocation, and to create new professions. Education also defines and develops the responsibilities towards one’s family and state.

Following claims of divine revelation—claims understood as privileged moments in time when God acts as a teacher and (re)educates humanity—the human being receives educational responsibilities. If to an inheritor of the Abrahamic faith system, the refusal of education may bring shame and poverty (Prv 13:18), excessive education may drive someone insane (Acts 26:24). Education can also prompt the Divine to hold the sage accountable for not hindering the ignorant from committing a sin (Sayid Sultan).<sup>8</sup>

With the sociologic progress of religion, the idea of religious education and literacy led to the creation of structure. Through education, structured religions enforced cohesiveness within groups, as well as the leader’s superiority in relation to the rest of the group. With God as a teacher, the human being became a learner. Even though all learners had equal status, the messenger between the teacher and the pupil was granted a privileged status.

In time, organized religions began mimicking the divine-human paradigm by creating new structures of authority. From its outset, the new structures of authority granted a more dignified status to those fulfilling the teaching function, such as clergy and prophets.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the conflict between the superior status of a teacher (be this purely religious or both secular-religious), and the equal status of each human being before the divinity, led to a loss of dignity, when such “divinely” ordained leaders abused their status and begun humiliating, rejecting and alienating the other human beings. In reaction to this reality, the move was to shatter the paradigm of divinely-ordained<sup>10</sup> status of superiority, and return all authority to the *saeculum*; that is to the living generation.

This return of dignity back to the living generation led to various forms of social reorganization polarized between the particularity of nationalism and transnational cosmopolitanism. Chauvinist nationalist education excluded the ethnic “other” and argued that it protected the dignity of the group, seeing it as “an imagined political community, which is inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>11</sup> Calvinist universalism, on the other hand, considered any human being as a “neighbor” — “the meaning of ‘neighbor’ being that *all* persons, near and distant, are to be loved”<sup>12</sup>—and called for the protection of human dignity through human rights advocacies.

The twentieth century valued education not only as a human right, but more so as a national resource, and as a matter of national security. Therefore, the states began investing resources to massively educate its citizens and created universities, laboratories, and so on.

Today, at the global level, the Combined Gross Enrolment Ratio (CGER)—that is the index that compares actual school enrolment from kindergarten through university against the ‘school-age’ population—reveals that religious attitudes toward education can be highly correlated with school enrollment.<sup>13</sup>

Combined gross enrolment ratio (CGER)					
high country value	COUNTRY	CGER (%)	low country values	COUNTRY	CGER (%)
1	Australia	113	191	Mali	37
2	New Zealand	109	192	Eritrea	35
3	Denmark	103	193	Congo	34
4	Finland	102	194	Central African Rep	30
5	Taiwan	100	195	Burkina Faso	29
6	Ireland	100	196	Angola	26
7	Canada	100	197	Djibouti	26
8	Norway	99	197	Niger	23
9	Greece	99	199	Somaliland	10
10	Netherlands	99	200	Somalia	10

In the United States, according to the data collected by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, education and literacy reveals significant differences based on religious traditions.

#### Educational Levels of Religious Groups in the U.S.<sup>14</sup>

	Less than High School	High School Graduate	Some College	College Graduate	Post Graduate	
	%	%	%	%	%	
TOTAL POPULATION	14	36	23	16	11	=100
Protestant	14	38	24	15	9	=100
Evangelical churches	16	40	24	13	7	=100
Mainline churches	8	34	24	20	14	=100
Historically black churches	19	40	25	11	5	=100
Catholic	17	36	21	16	10	=100
Mormon	10	30	32	18	10	=100

Jehovah's Witness	19	50	22	6	3	=100
Orthodox	6	26	22	28	18	=100
Jewish	3	19	19	24	35	=100
Muslim	21	32	23	14	10	=100
Buddhist	3	23	26	22	26	=100
Hindu	4	12	10	26	48	=100
Unaffiliated	13	34	24	16	13	=100
Atheist	7	28	23	21	21	=100
Agnostic	5	22	30	23	20	=100
Secular unaffiliated	10	35	25	17	13	=100
Religious unaffiliated	21	40	22	11	6	=100

## Wealth and Poverty

In a predominantly materialistic society, there is nothing more humiliating than poverty. In the contemporary world, there is no doubt that the status of wealth and poverty deeply affects one's sense dignity, particularly during periods of economic downturn. While the status of wealth tends to give someone an attitude of superiority, poverty does the opposite. It entrenches the individual into deprivation and meaninglessness—particularly in a consumerist global culture—where cultural particularity is generally trivialized, devalued, and underrated in monetary terms.

Strongly correlated with literacy, the wealth/poverty variable represents another indicator that helps one understand how religion (re)shapes dignity. For example, in the United States the variable of income distribution by religious affiliation mirrors the variable of education.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the better educated the better off economically. The income distribution data collected by the Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life displays strong differentiation between religious groups,<sup>16</sup> indicating that the Hindus are the richest religious minority (65%), and the black Protestants are the poorest (73%).

	<b>RICH</b> more than \$75,000/year/ individual	<b>STRUG-</b> <b>GLING</b> \$50,000 to \$74,999/year/ individual	<b>POOR</b> less than \$49,999/ year/indi- vidual
Hindu	65%	22%	19%
Jewish	58%	12%	25%
Orthodox Christians	41%	16%	44%
Buddhist	39%	17%	44%
Mainline Protestant	36%	18%	46%
Mormon	32%	22%	47%
Unaffiliated	32%	16%	52%
Catholic	33%	16%	51%
Evangelical Protestant	24%	18%	58%
Muslim	26%	15%	59%
Jehovah's Witness	18%	17%	65%
Black Protestants	15%	12%	73%

Compared by Abrahamic faiths, the individuals whose earning start at \$100,000 a year per individual, 46% are Jews, 17.8% Christians, and 16% Muslims.

<b>EXTREMELY RICH</b> at least \$100,000/year/individual	
Jewish	46%
Hindu	43%
Orthodox Christians	28%
Buddhist	22%
Mainline Protestant	21%
Catholic	19%
Unaffiliated	19%
Muslim	16%
Mormon	16%
Evangelical Protestant	13%
Jehovah's Witness	9%
Black Protestants	8%

At the opposite spectrum, the Muslims rank first with 35% individuals earning less than \$30,000 a year per individual, followed by the Christians with an average of 31.4%, and Jewish with only 14%.

<b>EXTREMELY POOR</b> at most \$30,000/year/individual	
Black Protestants	47%
Jehovah's Witness	42%
Muslim	35%
Evangelical Protestant	34%
Catholic	31%
Unaffiliated	29%
Mormon	26%
Mainline Protestant	25%
Buddhist	25%
Orthodox Christians	20%
Jewish	14%
Hindu	9%

At the level of economic identity, religious performance offers not only a meaning to wealth and poverty, but also the glue necessary to solidify the community as far as sharing resources within the group is concerned. While some religious narratives offer various safety leverages to increase wealth within the group, others celebrate scarcity and offer consolation to those deprived and living in poverty. Religious institutions may also appeal to various theodicy strategies to suppress any sense of revolt against the polarization of resources, while promising a dignified afterlife.

## **Health and Religion**

Disease humiliates everyone. It disfigures the beautiful; it accelerates aging; it weakens the strong; it throws the rich into poverty. Disease leads to death.

Concerned with death and dying, one of the most primitive forms of religious activity, such as shamanism, attempted to retain (or to attain if lost) one's health of mind, body, and spirit. Beyond shamanism, the concern with health and healing had been a basic feature of all forms of religious life and activity.

Organized religions offered a spiritual logic and physical diagnosis (and remedies) to diseases through a holistic use of medicine (Sikhism), through faith mobilization in prayer (Shamanism), and through meditation on the divine (Hinduism). The aetiology of disease as well as its cure was sought either *internally* in one's sin or ignorance ("The one who sins is the one who will die"—Ezekiel 18:20), or *externally*, in one's *karma* (Hinduism), or demonic possession (Luke 4:33-37). Attempting to cure the disease, the Muslims built the *maristan* (hospital) next to holy places,<sup>17</sup> and the Orthodox built their *bolnița* (hospital) inside the monastery, in the proximity of the church and the cemetery.

Today, in a world highly engaged in competition over resources and longevity, the concerns with human health have been at the forefront of public discourse. The contrast between the Global North and the Global South is stark. For instance, compared with countries in the Global North, sub-Saharan African countries have the least access to clean water, lowest health care, lowest life expectancy, and the highest rates of malaria, HIV, and infant mortality.<sup>18</sup>

Human dignity in relation to health had been analyzed predominantly from the perspective of human integrity (in bioethics), and from the perspective of human compassion (in health care policy.)

From a bioethical perspective, cloning to produce children—for instance—raises concerns not only about physical safety, but also about dignity and moral integrity. Cloning to produce children raises questions of liberty in manufacture, eugenics, family relations, individuality and identity, and its effects on society.

From the perspective of public policy, the current discourse highlights a tension between human compassion and the ‘robber-baron’ capitalism. The relation between the need for healthcare and the resource availability is increasingly undertaken from the perspective of social justice; demanding equity of supply for each individual, and equal access to quality healthcare. In the United States, additional tensions are being raised by the interposition of healthcare industry between the doctor and the patient which not only eliminated the Hippocratic culture, but also regards the doctor and the patient as resources to be exploited. While there is no coherent framework that would monitor and reprimand violations of human dignity in the field of healthcare, the ongoing trend is to approach it from the perspective of human rights. In fact, the *Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action* adopted by the World Conference on Human Rights held during 14-25 June 1993, strongly emphasized human dignity and healthcare as human rights.<sup>19</sup>

## Religion and Conflict

Each human being wishes to be recognized and honored. Everyone wishes to live a meaningful and a purposeful life. As Karen Armstrong writes, “we are meaning-seeking creatures and, unlike other animals, fall very easily into despair if we fail to make sense of our lives.”<sup>20</sup> When life’s meaning is lost a human being falls prey either to masochism, by inflicting self-punishment, or to sadism by inflicting pain upon others. The human being becomes violent. Dignity (and its loss) affects not only individual behavior but also group behavior, and as such it becomes a source of collective power. Handling dignity with care prevents conflicts from erupting. This is because the human dimension of conflict rests on the fundamental assumption that when one’s dignity is threatened, the individual as well as the group will, if necessary, react violently to restore it.

And—as Donna Hicks put it—“the main point here is to recognize another source of power. Power that is defined not by the strength of armies, sophistication of weapons, or the control of resources, but by the capacity of human spirit to overcome even the most primal of human instincts—the instinct of self-preservation—in the service of the restoration of human dignity.”<sup>21</sup>

Humiliation is the opposite of dignity, and it can transcend borders and generations, and have unexpected consequences. Dignity and its absence can, on the long term, create cultures of peace or cultures of violence.<sup>22</sup>

At a religious level, organized religions behave ambivalently.<sup>23</sup> They endorse peace and violence,<sup>24</sup> and in doing so, they offer spiritual narratives that give meaning to human actions, they impose various ethical standards, and solidify these attitudes in the public consciousness through the power of ritual.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

In conclusion, at a sociological level, religion has multiple effects on human dignity. While it may be true that under conditions of scarcity and threat, religion becomes protective of its own membership, and discriminates those who believe differently, such conduct of religion is only episodic. What it is constant is its benefic impact on human dignity. From this sketchy appraisal, one is able to conclude that the religious espousal for human dignity has been as consistent through human history, as it is crucial today in offering meaning to human actions meant to alleviate poverty, to expand education, to provide responsible healthcare, and to prevent violence. The existing data along with the general trends and attitudes point to new opportunities to understand that dignity matters, and that one cannot build a better future, unless one understands what honors or dishonors a human being.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Cf. <http://www.thesaurus.com/browse/dignity?s=t> (Last accessed on December 24, 2016.)

<sup>2</sup> Marian Gh. Simion, *Religion in political conflict: A constructivist theoretical model for public policy analysis, design, and implementation* PhD Dissertation. (Boston: Northeastern University, 2012), 138.

<sup>3</sup> James M. Henslin, *Sociology: A Down-to-Earth Approach* Eighth Edition. (Boston, New York: Pearson, 2007), 515-516.

<sup>4</sup> Emil Bartoş, *Deification in Eastern Orthodox Theology*, foreword by Kalistos Ware (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), 168-177, 229.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. <http://www.iqrasense.com/allah/islamic-viewpoint-on-god-made-man-in-his-own-image.html> (Last accessed on December 24, 2016.)

<sup>6</sup> Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *The Dignity of Man: An Islamic Perspective (Fundamental Rights and Liberties in Islam)* 2nd edition. (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2002), 10-12.

<sup>7</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses: Book II, Chapter 1*, in Robert Maynard Hutchins, ed., *Great Books of the Western World* vol. 12 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 139.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Tomlinson *Treasury of Religious Quotations* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1991), 66.

<sup>9</sup> Mortimer J. Adler, William Gorman, eds. "Education" pp.376-399, in *The Great Ideas: A Syntopicon of Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 1, (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 397.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict Anderson *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised Edition ed. (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 16.

<sup>11</sup> Anderson, 5-7.

<sup>12</sup> Gene Outka, "On Reformed Christianity and Natural Human Rights," in Sumner B. Twiss, Marian Gh. Simion, Rodney L. Petersen (eds.) *Religion and Public Policy: Human Rights, Conflict and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 26.

<sup>13</sup> Todd M. Johnson & Kenneth R. Ross eds., *Atlas of Global Christianity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Luis Lugo, et al. *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* (Washington, D.C.: The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008), 56.

<sup>15</sup> Lugo, et al., 58.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/01/30/income-distribution-within-us-religious-groups/> (Last accessed on December 26, 2016.)

<sup>17</sup> John Bowker, ed. *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* "Healing" entry. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 416.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, Ross, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/Vienna.aspx> (Last accessed on December 29, 2016.)

<sup>20</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York: Anchor Books, 2015), 36.

<sup>21</sup> Rodney L. Petersen "Dignity Matters' Interview with Donna Hicks" pp. 245-248 in Rodney L. Petersen, *Overcoming Violence: Religion, Conflict, and Peacebuilding*, (Newton Centre: Boston Theological Institute, 2010), 245-246.

<sup>22</sup> David D. Laitin, "National Revivals and Violence." in *European Journal of Sociology* (1995/36), 3-43.

<sup>23</sup> R. Scott Appleby, 1999. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, Publishers, Inc. 1999.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Gopin *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence and Peacemaking*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Simion, 217.