Combining Jewish, Greek, and Roman teachings with the radical new teachings of Christ and St. Paul, Christianity helped to cultivate the cardinal ideas of dignity, equality, liberty, and democracy that ground the modern human rights paradigm. Christianity also helped shape the law of public, private, penal, and procedural rights that anchor modern legal systems in the West and beyond. This collection of essays explores these Christian contributions to human rights through the perspectives of jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and history. The authors also analyze Christianity’s contribution to the special rights claims of women, children, and the environment, and document the church’s repeated failures to live up to the human rights ideals it has long advocated. With contributions from leading scholars, including a foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, this book provides an authoritative treatment of how Christianity shaped human rights in the past, and how Christianity and human rights continue to challenge each other in modern times.

JOHN WITTE, JR. is Jonas Robitscher Professor of Law, Alonzo L. McDonald Family Foundation Distinguished Professor, and Director of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University. His previous publications include The Sins of the Fathers: The Law and Theology of Illegitimacy Reconsidered (Cambridge, 2009), Christianity and Law: An Introduction (with Frank S. Alexander, Cambridge, 2008), The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism (Cambridge, 2007), and Law and Protestantism: The Legal Teachings of the Lutheran Reformation (Cambridge, 2002).

FRANK S. ALEXANDER is Sam Nunn Professor of Law and Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University. His previous publications include Georgia Real Estate Finance and Foreclosure Law (5th edn, 2009), and, with John Witte, Jr., The Teachings of Modern Christianity on Law, Politics and Human Nature, 2 vols. (2006) and The Weightier Matters of the Law: Essays on Law and Religion (1988).
CHRISTIANITY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

An Introduction

EDITED BY

JOHN WITTE, JR. AND FRANK S. ALEXANDER

Center for the Study of Law and Religion
Emory University
To Alonzo L. McDonald

Christian Visionary, Moral Exemplar, Generous Friend


Contents

List of contributors

Acknowledgements

The first word: to be human is to be free
Desmond M. Tutu

Introduction
John Witte, Jr.

Foundations and Developments of Human Rights

1 The Judaic foundation of rights
   David Novak

2 Ius in Roman law
   Charles Donahue, Jr.

3 Human rights and early Christianity
   David E. Aune

4 Human rights in the canon law
   R. H. Helmbolz

5 The modern Catholic Church and human rights: the impact of the Second Vatican Council
   J. Bryan Hehir

6 Rights and liberties in early modern Protestantism: the example of Calvinism
   John Witte, Jr.

7 Modern Protestant developments in human rights
   Nicholas P. Wolterstorff

vii
## Contents

8 The issue of human rights in Byzantium and the Orthodox Christian tradition  
*John A. McGuckin*

9 The human rights system  
*T. Jeremy Gunn*

10 The image of God: rights, reason, and order  
*Jeremy Waldron*

11 Religion and equality  
*Kent Greenawalt*

12 Proselytism and human rights  
*Silvio Ferrari*

13 Religious liberty, church autonomy, and the structure of freedom  
*Richard W. Garnett*

14 Christianity and the rights of children: an integrative view  
†*Don S. Browning*

15 Christianity and the rights of women  
*M. Christian Green*

16 Christianity, human rights, and a theology that touches the ground  
*Robert A. Seiple*

17 A right to clean water  
*John Copeland Nagle*

The final word: can Christianity contribute to a global civil religion?  
*Robert N. Bellah*

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**Biblical index**

**Index**
Contributors

Frank S. Alexander is Sam Nunn Professor of Law and Founding Director of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University.

David E. Aune is Walter Professor of New Testament and Christian Origins at the University of Notre Dame.

Robert N. Bellah is Elliott Professor of Sociology Emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley.

† Donald Browning was Alexander Campbell Professor of Ethics and the Social Sciences Emeritus at the University of Chicago Divinity School and Senior Fellow of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University.

Charles Donahue, Jr. is Paul A. Freund Professor of Law at Harvard Law School.

Silvio Ferrari is Professor of Law at the University of Milan.

Richard W. Garnett is Professor of Law and Associate Dean at the University of Notre Dame Law School and Senior Fellow of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University.

M. Christian Green is Alonzo L. McDonald Family Senior Lecturer and Senior Research Fellow at Emory University.

Kent Greenawalt is University Professor at Columbia Law School.

T. Jeremy Gunn is Associate Professor of International Studies at Al Akhawayn University, Morocco, and Senior Fellow of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University.
List of contributors

J. Bryan Hehir is Parker Gilbert Montgomery Professor of the Practice of Religion and Public Life at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and Secretary for Social Services in the Archdiocese of Boston.

R. H. Helmholz is Ruth Wyatt Rosenson Distinguished Service Professor of Law at the University of Chicago.

John A. McGuckin is Ane Marie and Bent Emil Nielsen Professor in Late Antique and Byzantine Christian History at Union Theological Seminary, Professor of Byzantine Christian Studies at Columbia University, and Senior Fellow of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University.

John Copeland Nagle is John N. Matthew Professor of Law at University of Notre Dame Law School.

David Novak is J. Richard and Dorothy Shiff Chair of Jewish Studies, Professor of the Study of Religion, and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Toronto.

Robert A. Seiple is Former President of World Vision and Former Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom at the Department of State.

Desmond M. Tutu is Anglican Archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa.

Jeremy Waldron is University Professor at New York University School of Law and Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory, Oxford University.

John Witte, Jr. is Jonas Robitscher Professor of Law, Alonzo L. McDonald Family Foundation Distinguished Professor, and Director of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University.

Nicholas P. Wolterstorff is Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology Emeritus at Yale University, Senior Fellow at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the University of Virginia, and Senior Fellow of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University.
In this volume, twenty leading scholars explore the contributions of Christianity to the development of human rights in the West. Combining Jewish, Greek, and Roman teachings with the radical new teachings of Christ and St. Paul, Christianity helped to cultivate the cardinal ideas of dignity, equality, liberty, and democracy that ground the modern human rights paradigm. Christianity also helped to shape the law of public, private, penal, and procedural rights that anchor modern legal systems in the West and beyond. The pages that follow explore these Christian contributions to basic human rights through the lenses of jurisprudence, theology, philosophy, and history. They also explore Christian contributions to the special rights claims of women and children, the poor and the needy, prisoners and enemies, nature and the environment. No author ignores the church’s own checkered human rights record over the centuries and the many failings of Christians to live up to their own human rights ideals. Nor does anyone pretend that Christianity has had or should have a monopoly on rights talk – let alone on the legal structures that implement rights. But every author believes that Christian ideas and institutions are essential to the cultivation of human rights today – and a few of them, starting with Archbishop Tutu, offer pointed injunctions on how to live out the ideals of human rights in thought, word, and deed.

This volume is part and product of an ongoing project on Christian Legal Studies, undertaken by our Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University in Atlanta. This project, which has involved 200-plus scholars over twenty-plus years, explores the historical and contemporary influence of Christian ideas, institutions, and individuals on Western law, politics, and society. In its earlier phases, this project analyzed some of the Christian foundations and fundamentals of Western constitutionalism, democracy, and religious liberty, yielding a score of volumes that have appeared in a score of languages. In its current phase, the project has commissioned thirty new volumes on the past and potential
contributions of Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox Christianity to the hard legal and political questions that are now challenging and dividing church, state, and society.

This volume – and the broader project of Christian legal studies of which it is a part – was made possible by generous grants from the Alonzo L. McDonald Family Foundation and the Henry Luce Foundation, Inc. We express our profound gratitude to Alonzo, Peter, and Suzie McDonald, and Robert Pool of the McDonald Foundation and to Michael Gilligan and his Luce colleagues for their generous and genial support. We express our warm thanks to our Center colleagues – April Bogle, Linda King, Anita Mann, and Amy Wheeler – for their effective and efficient administrative work on this volume and related projects. We thank the Emory International Law Review for permission to reprint Desmond Tutu’s essay herein. And we thank Kate Brett and Laura Morris and their colleagues at Cambridge University Press for taking on this volume and bringing it to print with their usual excellence and professionalism.

This volume is dedicated to Dr. Alonzo L. McDonald, Christian visionary, moral exemplar, and generous friend to so many.

John Witte, Jr. and Frank S. Alexander