

## Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered

This is the first global examination of the historical relationship between Christianity and human rights in the twentieth century. Leading historians, anthropologists, political theorists, legal scholars, and scholars of religion develop fresh approaches to issues such as human dignity, personalism, religious freedom, the role of ecumenical and transatlantic networks, and the relationship between Christian and liberal rights theories. In doing so they move well beyond the temporal and geographical limits of the existing scholarship, exploring the connection between Christianity and human rights, not only in Europe and the United States, but also in Africa, Latin America, and China. They offer alternative chronologies and bring to light overlooked aspects of this history, including the role of race, gender, decolonization, and interreligious dialogue. Above all, these chapters foreground the complicated relationship between global rights discourses – whether Christian, liberal, or otherwise – and the local contexts in which they are developed and implemented.

Sarah Shortall is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. Her work has appeared in *Past and Present*, *Modern Intellectual History*, the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and *Boston Review*. She is the author of *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: The Politics of Theology in Twentieth-Century France* (forthcoming).

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# Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered

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*Edited by*

**Sarah Shortall**

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## Preface

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*Samuel Moyn*

In a short time, the study of the relation of Christianity to human rights has passed a critical threshold. Not long ago, except for a dispute among Roman Catholic scholars about origins reflecting a twentieth-century dilemma about whether to treat rights as appalling or indispensable, it was still common to claim that Christianity must have “contributed” somehow to the making of human rights. And the chief reason for this tradition was a larger historiography of human rights that understood its task to be the acknowledgment of influences and the accumulation of precedents.

Nowadays the intellectual situation looks entirely different. From one perspective the intra-Catholic dispute about human rights has been generalized. A default liberalism has been newly challenged from perspectives outside the mainstream, many of which can allow for nagging doubts about the beneficence of rights, or radical interpretations that profoundly transform their ethical and political bearing. To be sure, Karl Marx himself offered an excoriating treatment of rights and the critical legal studies movement revived it a few decades ago. But then, over the same period, liberalism itself clove to rights frameworks like never before in its own contested history, especially after the publication of John Rawls’s *Theory of Justice* in 1971. So it is hard to doubt that the past few years have opened up an intensity of challenge to “human rights” such as would have been surprising shortly before.

From another perspective, the historiographical terrain for stories about where rights came from has undergone a seismic shift of massive proportions. A more or less uncritical historiography of rights that grew over several decades around the turn of the millennium was challenged soon after, starting with Lynn Hunt’s *Inventing Human Rights* (2007). The effect was augmented because, whatever the prior efforts to reconstruct the history of rights generally (and the relation of Christianity to them), an altogether new push to discern the origins of human rights appeared thanks to the great new age of the internationalization of the principles in global politics in the era straddling the Cold War’s end. At

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first this push shared something of the ratification of human rights as the morality at the end of history of some complacent liberal histories. But in short order a more fully critical spirit prevailed and “the dark sides of virtue” became fashionable to highlight, whether because of entanglements of human rights with the hierarchies of geopolitics or neoliberalism.

In short, disputes around both rights themselves and stories of their origins transformed out of all recognition the setting for making claims about how Christianity fit in. This volume marks another stage in that transformation, as scholars clear the wreckage of prior contests for new engagements, or even begin in earnest in taking up new stances on the relationship between Christianity and human rights. A number of the chapters take up my lectures on *Christian Human Rights* (2015), but this volume is far more than merely a referendum on it from diverse perspectives. An essential purpose of this book, indeed, is to leave the debates sparked by any one position behind, in order to move fully into an age of scholarship with the hallmarks of every mature field: it is always critical but also always pluralistic. For that reason, even when they do directly engage my own book, various chapters are best read as establishing a range of interpretive options for continuing disagreement. Fortunately, when it comes to Christianity and human rights now, there is a conversation in which no one gets the last word.

This is especially true insofar as some of the chapters shift the timeline far toward the present from the middle of the twentieth century where others linger, while another set of authors explores far beyond the transatlantic geography of initial discussions. For that matter, historians of the United States have insisted that their evidence suggests a very different landscape than historians of Europe have depicted even when they have striven to include American Christianity – and other authors push the geography of inquiry into Africa and Asia too.

At the end of the exercise, if anything stands out, it is the question of what risks loss – including loss when Christianity receives too much attention as a source of human rights ideals and practices. After all, in the long history of Christianity, affirmations of and resistance to human rights may never have been much more than marginal and other concerns prevailed – and the same could occur again in the future. It is possible that the greatest risk is that Christianity, whether it invented human rights or not, and whether its agenda is advanced through appeal to them or not, is reduced when its relation to human rights is at the forefront.

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