The contribution of the concept of the dignity of the human person to religious and human rights education

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My research is conceptual in character and focussed on relating philosophical and theological ideas to education.

I am interested in how these ideas might be helpful in how education is conceived, specifically in how the concept of dignity could be utilised in human rights education and also religious education, both as curriculum content and as a term which has pedagogical implications and implications about the philosophy of both subjects. For those unfamiliar with the term HRE, it can be briefly defined as an education for the development of the whole person, a moral education that promotes human rights and fundamental freedoms, and a collecting term for peace education, intercultural education, education for tolerance and understanding and education for democracy and sustainable development.

Human rights education, as conceived in the general definition within Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the recent United Nations World Programme for Human Rights Education (2005 onwards) has received interest and contribution from International Religious Education perspectives notably in the contribution of RE to peace education (see for instance Jackson and Fujiwara, 2007, King, 2007, and others in the special edition of the British Journal of Religious Education on Peace Education and Religious Plurality) and human rights in Islamic Education (Castelli, & Trevathan 2008).

Some attention has been given to the curriculum of Religious Education charting conflicts between schools and parents over the curriculum inclusion of secular perspectives (Gunhild Hagesæther* and Signe Sandsmark, 2006 and Barnes, 2002) and also the way in which the RE curriculum should be developed in the light of the human rights culture and the citizenship curriculum (Gearon, 2008, 2004, 2002a, 2002b).


Inherent dignity or worth is offered as a foundation for human rights in the UDHR itself. Frequently it is conceived in Kantian terms of treating a person as an end, and
never merely as a means, though the question of the foundation of human rights is of course the subject of considerable dispute and many have forsaken any attempt at finding such a foundation. It was not defined at the time of the UDHR because of the difficulty of getting cross cultural and religious agreement about such definitions as were offered and the practical desire to succeed in getting political agreement overrode the philosophical problem. In searching for a foundation for human rights we encounter the problem of securing of agreement between different traditions and philosophies about the nature of that foundation and are left with only a pragmatic or weak basis for human rights. This presents an interesting difficulty for human rights education as moral education without foundation seems unreasonable. One thing that does stand out from the concept of dignity in human rights is that it is a form of inherent or intrinsic worth, not a value attributed by society or anything else. This too begs questions about the justification of such a claim, which in the UDHR comes across as a faith claim, a foundational belief.

Perhaps the concept of the dignity of the human person could be more helpful than it currently seems to be, not only in providing a philosophical and theological basis for moral education but also in offering some educational ideas as well – or rather informing something of the character of HRE beyond a foundation. Dignity is certainly an enduring idea, both in popular and intellectual circles.

Starting from the premise that moral education needs some kind of foundation, what alternatives are there to the weak notion of human rights as unfounded but useful things. Are there ways in which dignity might be used to redeem HRE from being a politically driven moral education, rather than a philosophically driven or theologically driven one.

Two alternatives have been suggested:

**Exclusive and incompatibilistic foundation**

Firstly there are those who advocate an Exclusive and incompatibilistic foundation. That is to say a foundation which has an exclusively defined narrative that offers no possibility of compatibility with alternative narratives. There are two clear examples of this approach from opposing quarters. On the one hand there is a western liberal democratic form, found for example in Jack Donnelly’s work, which advances a notion of human rights and dignity conditioned by a particular collection of western liberal democratic values. These values which include particular notions of freedom and equality, are suggested as universally normative, just as rights are claimed to be. They are not compatible with other notions of dignity found in traditional, religious societies which would undermine, for instance the equality of women. Essentially this requires the adoption of a particular narrative as an over-riding cultural/moral norm against which others are judged – a universal human rights culture. The problem with this approach is that it offers no solution to a religiously plural society. And a human rights education that was based on such a normative universality would not be sensitive to intercultural understanding or tolerance of difference, other aspects of human rights education.
Another exclusive and incompatibilistic foundation is offered by some theologians who see human rights as founded in the gift of God. Dignity is derivative of God, not an inherent foundation. This is found in the work of Soulen and Woodhead. This confounds the earlier problem that it does not suit a religious plural society, for educational purposes, with a new problem of incompatibility with the notion of dignity found in the UDHR, by relegating it to a second order value. It would be more logical to abandon all notions of human rights if one was to choose that route.

Incompatibilistic and exclusive definitions of the foundation of human rights do not leave much space for dialogue in moral education which is ultimately limited to acceptance or rejection of the foundation – conversion or heresy. Human rights history has many examples where the declarations allowed for groups to be excluded and left to be humiliated by those who had rights. Women, slaves, those of the wrong race or religion were fair game, less human. Baxi argues that dialogue is necessary to allow for ongoing revelation of suffering – he sees human rights in terms of revealing where suffering is and sees inter-cultural dialogue as a very important mechanism for doing so. “all come as equal strangers to the task of protection and promotion of human rights,” (Baxi, 26). Such dialogue requires that people come to the table on equal footings, otherwise there will be a strong sense that one party, likely the non-western party, will begin to reject the western/Christian imperialist overtones. It disables any inter-cultural, multi-civilizational discourse on the history or genealogy of human rights. If human rights or dignity are a western liberal or western Christian invention then it is short step to conclude they are absent in the non-west. He concludes:

“This leads to a rank denial, or even in a post colonial and post socialist age, of equal discursive dignity to other cultures or civilizations. It also imparts a loss of reflexivity, in terms of intercultural learning, for the Euro-American traditions of human rights.” (Baxi, 2003:25)

“Non-Western cultures will gain evidence for the view that human rights are merely the artifacts of a phase of modern Western sentiment or merely philosophical intuitions born from peculiar social conditions. Fortified by such evidence, they may become more entrenched in their resistance to what appears to them to be a new colonialism. They will not have to face the question as to whether documents such as the United Nations’ Universal declaration represent an ultimately valid insight about and for humanity …” {Stackhouse, 1998 #1365}

This hardly seems helpful for moral education in a religiously plural society.

**Aligning and compatible foundation**

However, there are examples of those who maintain that it is possible to find some degree of alignment and compatibility around the notion of dignity, as inherent worth. It is evident in Catholic Theology, notably the work of Jacque Maritain, the writings of the Vatican II council and the writing of Pope John Paul II, both before and after he became Pope, of a more compatible notion of dignity that recognises it is an inherent or intrinsic good. A more inclusive religious and philosophical alignment at a
conceptual level, which nonetheless can be understood within differing narrative structures, could provide a foundation for moral education with human rights. John Paul II expresses the need to explore dignity within one's own tradition as an educational imperative. Here tradition exploration includes personal faith development and personal moral and values development. He writes that we are inspired to "explore more deeply" the nature of human dignity. He goes further to say this is the task of all religious believers, “It is … the task of the various schools of thought – in particular the communities of believers – to provide the moral bases for the juridic edifice of human rights.”¹ and we can extend this to suggest it is the task of all.

To this we can add the educational need to intercultural dialogue around the concept of dignity.

“Dialogue is only possible when we recognize the voice of the Other. Dialogue entails the recognition or plurality and multiplicity. Any exclusion of certain voices from the public sphere emerges then as a form of social and epistemological violence.” (Baxi, 2006:271)

There are examples where diverse groups have been affected by common experiences of suffering and have overcome differences in responding to those experiences. “Transnational dialogue of this kind is a provocation to reflect more deeply, collectively, and comparatively on the breadth of human experience and the fulfilment of elemental human needs and desires.” (Carozza, 2008:7-8 ) Such experiences have led to intercultural reflection on dignity.

So I conclude that reflection on the meaning of the inherent worth of the human person within one’s own tradition (or complexity of traditions) alongside intercultural dialogue in response to common experiences, in the interest in revealing suffering where it still exists (Baxi) provide important aims for HRE and RE, and in the English context citizenship education as well. It provides a convergence point for the subjects. Whether it also provides a foundation for human rights is another matter. I suspect that the foundation will always be a belief.

References


¹ John Paul II, address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, 9 January, 1989, par. 7.
Gearon, L. (2008), Freedom from repression: some thoughts on totalitarianism for religious, spiritual and citizenship/human rights education. International Journal of Children's Spirituality, Vol 13, No 1, pp. 5-14,

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