Author:	Heller, Birgit
Title:	“To Whom It May Concern: Humanity and Dignity in Interreligious Perspective“
Published in:	Re-learning to be human in global times: challenges and opportunities from the perspectives of contemporary philosophy and religion. Washington, D.C: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy
Volume:	Cultural heritage and contemporary change. Series IV, Western European philosophical studies; Bd. 12
Year:	2018
Pages:	47 – 58
ISBN:	978-1-56518-333-9

5.

To Whom It May Concern: Humanity and Dignity in Interreligious Perspective

BIRGIT HELLER

What Is Humanity? A Few Introductory Comments

Regarding the definition of the human being, a broad consensus is only available in biological terms. The definitions of cultures, religions, and academic disciplines are based on different ideas and images of the human being. Therefore, the problem, which is intertwined with the terms humanity and dignity, as well, is due to *different* normative requirements deduced from the postulated real nature or the ideal destination of humankind. Although global coexistence is in need of universal values and norms, no idea of humanity has evolved up to now that is completely free from particular cultural and religious perspectives, nor is one seemingly anticipated in the near future.

In the course of cultural development the human being, more precisely man, has very often been defined by distinction from others: from animals, "barbarians," slaves, women, and other genders.[1] Most of the time distinction was accompanied by discrimination towards the contrasted being. Man asserts himself by demanding authority and dominance based on his apparent peculiarity. This peculiarity of human existence constitutes human dignity. Therefore, religious and philosophical approaches to humanity are always concerned with human dignity as well. This is the reason I am addressing humanity and dignity simultaneously.

As a moral norm and ideal, humanity is more than an attitude towards and behavior among human beings. It is connected with the values of equality and justice and cannot be restricted to human beings alone. Humanity is not confined to the observance of human rights, but involves an active engagement and striving towards a good life for all. Humanity embraces respect and protection of life and nature, solidarity with the living beings, and responsibility for the welfare of the world. In the following I will deal with some aspects of humanity and dignity in the most influential religious traditions. First of all, I will give an overview of religious equivalents to the term dignity, and then I will focus on the issues of equality and justice which are inseparably linked with the different religious concepts of humanity. Aiming at the illustration of common and clearly distinct positions, I have selected the two topics of anthropocentrism and androcentrism. At long last, I will shortly address the question of whether and how religions can contribute to humanity.

---

[1] Since ancient times, there exist many cultures which discern more than two genders and distinguish man from women and other genders. Nevertheless, man is regarded as the norm, from which all others deviate and, often enough, they are despised and marginalized. Although there are no uniform definitions for the many terms used to designate sex and gender variations, today all the culture-specific concepts can be subsumed under the umbrella term "transgender people" (there are also other notions, such as third/multiple gender, intergender, fluid gender, queer, and so on). A broad range of examples are collected by Sabrina Petra Ramet (ed.), *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1996); phenomena of "third gender" or transgender, respectively, hold a more than prominent place in the realms of Indian mythology, religion, and society, cf. Birgit Heller, "Symbols of Emancipation? Images of God/dess, Devotees and Trans-sex/gender in Hindu Traditions," *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 5/1, pp. 235-257. The following discussion of humanity and dignity is focused on animals and women, although the issues of "barbarians" and transgenders are equally relevant.

Humanity and Dignity in Religious Traditions

Equivalents to the Term Dignity

In the Jewish and Christian traditions, human dignity has its basis on the idea of the God-likeness of men. In ancient Hebrew, the terms which can be seen as the equivalent to this idea are *zelem elohim*, "image of God," and *demut*, "likeness to God." Another important term essential to the idea of human dignity is *kabod*, God's "glory." In Psalm 8 we read that God crowned humanity with "glory and honor." That could also be translated as "dignity and grandeur" and is referring to the royal insignia which were bestowed upon humankind by God during its creation.[2] In the Jewish-rabbinic tradition the term God-likeness could also mean that humans are similar to God in shape, represent the divine claim to power, or try to imitate God in terms of leading an ethical life. The Christian idea of God-likeness draws on the Hebrew Tora and modifies it insofar as Christ is viewed as the ideal image (*eikon*) of God (cf. 2 Cor. 4, 4). Christ is seen as the ideal Adam, conveying God-likeness to all men. Through the act of baptism all believers are taking part in the nature of Christ, which enables a just way of life. The classical term of human dignity was already taken up in early Christian theology and was interpreted as an expression of God-likeness.[3]

In Islam, human dignity does not have its basis on the idea of God-likeness, since the difference between God and men is clearly marked**.** But God has provided men with a special kind of dignity: He has honored humankind and preferred it among all other beings (cf. Sūrah 17, 70).[4] The modern Arabic term for human dignity (*karāmat al-insān*) is derived from the same word root as the verb "to honor," used in Sūrah 17, 70.[5] The notion that man is chosen as *khalīfa* (cf. Sūrah 2, 30) as God's vicegerent on earth**,** is also significant for the idea of human dignity.[6] The term *khalīfa* has a double meaning and, until recently, both interpretations, i.e. "successor" (of other creatures) and "vicegerent," had been considered in the Islamic tradition. In the meanwhile, Muslim theologians mostly agree that the term has to be understood as vicegerent of God.

In the Hindu traditions, there are at least two equivalents corresponding to the idea of human dignity. For the classic-brahmanical tradition two terms are decisive: *brahman*, denoting the impersonal, spiritual, and ultimate principle of the cosmos, and *ātman*, referring to this fundamental principle as present in each living being.[7] Concerning the tradition of the brahmanical scholars, the specific human dignity consists in the possibility of realizing the true essence of reality, the unity of *ātman/brahman*, thereby achieving liberation from the cycle of rebirth. The theistic traditions are shaped by *bhakti*, a term derived from the Sanskrit *bhaj*, "to distribute; to share; to partake," with the meaning of "loving devotion." In this context, the

[2] Cf. Klaus Seybold, "Feindbild und Menschenwürde. Das Zeugnis der Psalmen," in Herms, Eilert (ed.), *Menschenbild und Menschenwürde (*Gütersloh: Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2001), pp. 308f.

[3] Cf. Wolfgang Huber, "Menschenwürde/Menschenrechte," in Müller, Gerhard (ed.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1992), Vol. 22, p. 578.

[4] All citations of the Qur'ān after: *The Koran Interpreted*, transl. Arthur J. Arberry (London: Allen & Unwin; New York: Macmillan, 1955), 2 Vols.

[5] Cf. Rotraud Wielandt, "Menschenwürde und Freiheit in der Reflexion zeitgenössischer muslimischer Denker," in Schwartländer, Johannes (ed.), *Freiheit der Religion. Christentum und Islam unter dem Anspruch der Menschenrechte* (Mainz: Matthias Grünewald-Verlag, 1993), p. 187.

[6] Rotraud Wielandt, "Man and His Ranking in the Creation: On the Fundamental Understanding of Islamic Anthropology," in Bsteh, Andreas (ed.), *Islam Questioning Christianity: Lectures – Questions – Interventions* (Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel, 2007), pp. 78f.

[7] Cf. Axel Michaels, *Der Hinduismus: Geschichte und Gegenwart* (München: Beck, 2006), pp. 286-289.

accent lies on the personal relationship between an absolute personal God and the human being; thus, human dignity consists in self-surrender and participation in God.

The Buddhist concepts of human dignity are similar to the classic-brahmanical idea concerning structure. In the tradition of Theravāda, the specific dignity of human beings consists in the capability for enlightenment. It is the precious privilege of the human form of existence to become a Buddha and, thereby, gain liberation from the circle of rebirth.[8] A partly different approach to dignity can be found in the tradition of Mahāyāna. Some schools teach that all living beings own the same universal Buddha nature. The term *tathāgatagarbha* is used in this context, offering different possibilities of translation, like "embryonic Buddha" or "essence of Buddha." Accordingly, the term expresses the possibility to become a Buddha, but can also mean that all living beings are already Buddha.[9]

Anthropocentrism – Humans are only Animals too

By definition, animals are no human beings, but human beings are animals. The dominant philosophical traditions in Western cultures have mostly stressed the difference between humans and animals.[10] Animals are predominantly considered as things and resources for the needs of human beings. And even if they are conceded a capacity for suffering or a certain form of intelligence, humans are said to have no (direct) moral obligations towards animals whatsoever. Only recently evolutionary biologists have gained impressive evidence on qualities such as empathy, justice, and benevolence, thus establishing a kind of morality in different species of mammals and especially among the apes.[11] This cognition provides conclusive reasons to oppose the claim that humanity and dignity are privileges of human beings alone. Recently, the perspectives of humanity and dignity have been broadened in different disciplines within the scientific community. Not only human rights, but also animal rights are increasingly under discussion.[12] Even the position of limiting humanity to beings possessing sentience or consciousness is controversial. In any case, attitudes against animals are guided by religious and philosophical ideas about animals and their relation to concepts such as soul, consciousness, matter and spirit, immortality, and so on.

Religions are divided in their attitudes towards animals. In Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the traditional concepts of man being the image of God or God's representative are shaped by anthropocentrism. In principle, in all these traditions, the idea of dignity is attributed to the whole creation and constitutes man's responsible interaction with his environment.[13] Nevertheless, the conviction of man's outstanding position as the climax or "crown" of creation dominated both thought and practice in the course of historical development. According to the Qur'ān, God has created the earth for the human beings to test them as regards to

[8] Cf. Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Das Boot der menschlichen Existenz. Zum Menschenbild im Buddhismus," in Hoffmann, Herbert (ed.), *Werde Mensch. Wert und Würde des Menschen in den Weltreligionen* (Trier: Paulinus, 1999), p. 24.

[9] Cf. Peter Gäng, *Buddhismus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus-Verlag, 2002), pp. 192-194, 208-211.

[10] Cf. Gary Steiner, *Anthropocentrism and Its Discounts: The Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010).

[11] One of the best known researchers is the primatologist Frans de Waal, who has published many scientific articles and popular scientific books about this issue, among them: *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates* (New York : WW Norton, 2013).

[12] See, for example, Cass R. Sunstein and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Animal Rights: Current Debates and New Directions* (New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010).

[13] Cf. Peter Gerlitz, *Mensch und Natur in den Weltreligionen: Grundlagen einer Religionsökologie* (Darmstadt: Primus-Verlag, 1998).

which of them is best in deed (Sūrah 18, 7), and moreover the whole creation has been subjected to man (Sūrah 31, 20). Thus, the earth primarily functions as the basis for human life and the place where people can prove their belief in God, although they are made responsible for the creation they are entrusted with. In accordance with the dominant lines of Jewish and Christian traditions, a clear anthropocentrism within the framework of human responsibility is evidently affirmed. In Islamic sources, statements about animals are contradictory.[14] On the one hand, there are traditions which condemn the ill-treatment and the senseless killing of animals; on the other hand, there is a saying that angels do not come in a house where a dog is. In any case, animals are definitely regarded as different from human beings because they lack rational soul. Therefore, generally they cannot participate in a life after death, although there is the belief that very special animals, like Muhammad's she-camel, will go to paradise. In Judaism, animals are regarded as sentient beings and the prohibition of cruelty towards them is enshrined in the Halacha, the Jewish Religious Law. Thus, animal slaughtering should be as painless as possible.[15] In sum, it can be stated that animals, both in the mainstream of Judaism and of Islam, should be well-treated, although most of the attention is paid to livestock. Concerning Christianity, most of the influential theologians of the early church advocated a hierarchical order of creation and distinguished human beings from animals, denying them dignity because of the lack of rationality, which is essential for the knowledge of God, and the (immortal) soul.[16] Increasingly, critical reflection on this anthropocentric image of the human being standing aloof from … the "crown of creation," as well as extensive discussions about animal ethics and animal rights, are to be found in modern Christian theology.[17] Nevertheless, concerning concrete criticism of cruel methods or other brutalities against animals, the declarations of the Christian churches remain mostly vague and imprecise. This has recently changed with the clear statements of Pope Francis in his encyclical "Lautato Si," published in 2015.[18]

In contrast to the Abrahamic religions, both Hindu and Buddhist traditions maintain that human beings do not *fundamentally* differ from other forms of life.[19] All living beings are connected together in the cosmic cycle of existence; the differences between them are only of grade. The additional value of human life, however, consists in the possibility to gain liberation from the cycle of rebirth. In Hindu tradition, the principal equality of all living beings is based on the idea of the unity of the ultimate reality (*brahman*) which is present as *ātman* in each living being. Another way to establish equality is related to the same capability of devotion: In the

[14] Cf. Halima Kraussen, "Islam," in Ferrari, Arianna and Petrus, Klaus (eds.), *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen* (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2015), p. 179.

[15] Cf. Hanna Rheinz, "Judentum," in Ferrari, Arianna and Petrus, Klaus (eds.), *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen* (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2915), pp. 187-189.

[16] Cf. Ulrich Volp, *Die Würde des Menschen. Ein Beitrag zur Anthropologie in der Alten Kirche* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), pp. 191, 215f., 221f., 229, 231-237.

[17] Cf., for example, Walter Dietz, "Christus – der neue Adam. Wert und Würde des Menschen im Christentum," in Hoffmann, Herbert (ed.), *Werde Mensch. Wert und Würde des Menschen in den Weltreligionen* (Trier: Paulinus, 1999), pp. 104f; Kurt Remele, *Die Würde des Tieres ist unantastbar. Eine neue christliche Tierethik* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker), 2016.

[18] Cf. Kurt Remele, "Christentum," in Ferrari, Arianna and Petrus, Klaus (eds.), *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen* (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2015), p. 64; Remele, *Die Würde des Tieres ist unantastbar,* pp. 115-117. The positions presented in the current World Catechism are still imprecise and do not take account of recent developments, cf. Remele, *Die Würde des Tieres ist unantastbar,* pp. 136-140.

[19] Cf. Ram Adhar Mall, *Der Hinduismus* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997), p. 37; Michael von Brück, "Die Menschenwürde in verschiedenen Religionen und Kulturräumen," in Vogel, Beatrix (ed.), *Umwertung der Menschenwürde – Kontroversen mit und nach Nietzsche* (Freiburg/München: Alber, 2014), pp. 347-349.

religiosity of the various *bhakti* traditions animals are important role models for the devotion to a personal godhead. It was not until modern times that representatives of the brahmanical Hindu tradition laid weight on the special status of human beings and justified their superiority on the possibility of gaining spiritual knowledge and the fulfillment of religious obligations.[20] In so far as man is proclaimed to be the center of the universe and the measure of all things,[21] the impact of Western philosophical thought is evident. Nevertheless, in history, there has always been a gap between the theoretical equality of all living beings and the actual practice. Some animals have been highly venerated (like cows or snakes), others have mostly been despised and ill-treated (like dogs).

Although the liberation from the cycle of rebirth is considered a human privilege in Buddhism, anthropocentric thinking as an expression of human hybris and does not find fertile soil. Equality between the living beings is established by the potentiality of Buddhahood or the universal Buddha-nature, respectively. The tales of the diverse existences of the historical Buddha in an animal's form[22] exemplify that animals are also on their way to Buddhahood and are therefore potential Buddhas. As written in an early Buddhist text called *Metta-Sutta*, the human being should cultivate boundless thoughts of loving kindness towards all beings on the way to enlightenment. This mindfulness is characterized as a state of recognizing oneself in all other beings by the prominent scholar of the 5th century BCE Buddhaghosa. Following Buddhaghosa, the state of recognizing oneself in all other beings more precisely means identifying all others with oneself.[23] Considering the mutual dependency of all living beings, Buddhist thought definitely has the potential to deconstruct the dualism between humans and animals. Nevertheless, Buddhist attitudes towards animals are not completely free of ambivalence: It cannot be denied that the human existence is regarded as clearly privileged and the propagated vegetarianism might not only be seen as an expression of empathy, but also as a means to avoid harm to human beings or even members of the own family who descended to the form of animals in the wheel of rebirth.[24]

Androcentrism: Privileged Hu-man-ity

Today's most prevalent religious traditions have a more or less androcentric bias in common. Thus, it is not clear at all if women are to be seen as entrusted with full humanity. Concerning the traditional positions of Jewish rabbis and Christian theologians, opinions about this subject are far away from being uniform, but it is widely taken for granted that women only indirectly have a share in the image of God. Therefore, it is pointed to the biblical account of creation, according to which God created the woman from the man's body. Whereas man is created in the image of God, woman is a "building" which God "prepared unto him [= unto

[20] Cf. R. Balasubramanian, "Die Stellung des Menschen in der Welt aus der Sicht des Hinduismus," in Panikkar, Raimondo and Strolz, Walter (eds.), *Die Verantwortung des Menschen für eine bewohnbare Welt im Christentum, Hinduismus und Buddhismus* (Freiburg/B.: Herder, 1985), p. 77.

[21] Cf. Balasubramanian, "Die Stellung des Menschen in der Welt aus der Sicht des Hinduismus," p. 76.

[22] *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey. Ārya Śūra's Jātakamālā,* transl. Peter Khoroche (Chicago: University of Chikago Press, 1989).

[23] Cf. *Visuddhi-magga oder der Weg zur Reinheit: die größte und älteste systematische Darstellung des Buddhismus,* transl. Nyanatiloka (Konstanz: Christiani 1975), p. 352.

[24] Cf. Scott Hurley, "Buddhismus," in Ferrari, Arianna and Petrus, Klaus (eds.), *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen* (Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag, 2015), pp. 61f.

man] out of himself [= out of man]" – the interpretation given in the Talmudic tractate *Kethuboth* 8a.[25]

The exact same line of reasoning dominates Christian tradition. In his first letter addressed to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul legitimates the demand that every woman should cover her head while praying to God according to the order of creation, building the foundation of a hierarchical gender order: Whereas man is the image and glory of God, woman is the glory of man. For man was not made from woman and not created for woman, he argues, but woman was made from man and created for man (1 Cor. 11, 7-9). Following the Church Father Augustine, whose influence in Western Christianity cannot be overestimated, man alone is the perfect and complete image of God, but woman is the image of God only in conjunction with man.[26] Concerning Thomas Aquinas,[27] whose positions where decisive for many Christian theologians until modern times, man presents the perfect image of God. Woman, by contrast, ranks behind man in respect to rationality, strength, and dignity. It is only in the course of the modern era that in Judaism and Christianity the opinion that both genders are assigned to dignity and humanity to the same extent gained grounds (as a side note, nowadays the question of full humanity and dignity has shifted to the debate on transgender people). Some decades ago, Jewish and Christian Feminist theology started to revise the androcentric traditions.[28] Whereas Feminist theologians lay the focus on gender equality, both orthodox Jewish rabbis and the Catholic teaching authority up to now are guided by the model of complementarity of man and woman, including a specific dignity of woman.[29]

In as far as women are subordinated to male authority in Islam they are obviously less qualified than men to be the vicegerent of God. According to Sūrah 4, 34, men are guardians, maintainers, or caretakers of women, for Allah has made them superior to women and because they must spend from their wealth. It is evident that, being dependent, women could not be *khalifas* in the same way as men were in Islamic history. Higher impurity of the body, lesser legal status, and partly reduced freedom of movement did not provide a good basis to fully entitle women to the role as representatives of God. Comparable to all other religious traditions, Muslim women as well have begun to reflect on their roles, their legacy, and their religious self-understanding.[30] The widespread view among modern Muslim thinkers is that

[25] *The Babylonian Talmud: Tractate Kethuboth,* transl. Samuel Daiches and Israel W. Slotki (Soncino Talmud Online: https://halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Kethuboth.pdf) [10.05.2017].

[26] Cf. Anne Jensen, *Frauen im frühen Christentum* (Bern: Lang, 2002), pp. 229-233.

[27] Cf. Monika Leisch-Kiesl, *Eva als Andere: eine exemplarische Untersuchung zu Frühchristentum und Mittelalter* (Köln: Böhlau, 1992), pp. 136-144.

[28] Cf. for example Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai*: *Judaism from a Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1990); Tal Ilan, *Mine and Yours Are Hers. Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: SCM Press LTD, 1983); Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Das Land, wo Milch und Honig fließt: Perspektiven einer feministischen Theologie* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1985).

[29] Cf. for example the Apostolic Letter of Pope John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year. Mulieris dignitatem* (Washington, D.C.: Unites States Catholic Conference, 1988).

[30] Cf. for example Riffat Hassan, "Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam," in Cooey, Paula M. et al. (eds.), *After Patriarchy. Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), pp. 39-64; Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).

men and women are equal concerning their dignity. Women are seen to be appointed as representatives of God just the same as men.[31]

Up to modern times and partly beyond, the classic-brahmanical Hindu tradition is shaped by an extreme androcentrism leading to a number of negative spin-offs. Just as men who belong to the lowest social class, women are excluded from the path of knowledge leading to the realization of *ātman/brahman*. As a consequence, they are not endowed with the same dignity and humanity as men are. One might say that a woman's dignity consists in serving her husband. According to the *Manusmṛti* – the most prominent text proscribing the norms of Hindu behavior, – the religious initiation for women is identified with marriage (*Manu* II, 67) and "a husband must be constantly worshipped as a god by a faithful wife" (*Manu* V, 154).[32] For women, the path to liberation leads to the privilege of a male rebirth at first and, subsequently, towards the ultimate goal, on the condition that they meet the requirements of feminine life primarily consisting in subordination and self-surrender. The case with the various Hindu traditions shaped by *bhakti*-religiosity is quite different. In this context, the devotee is regarded as *bhakta*, "shareholder" of God, who will reach the supreme goal irrespectively of social class and gender. This idea is already formulated in the *Bhagavadgītā* (9, 29-32),[33] an immensely influential and more than 2,000 years-old text. Very seldom, however, this view has given way to social and political equality of all human beings; most of the time, equality remained restricted to the religious realm.[34] Concerning modern Hinduism, quite a few of the movements which emerged from the 19th century onwards, base dignity and equality of man and woman (and of all human beings) on the concept of *ātman*, as being present in both genders in the same way. Characteristics of sex and gender are only regarded as external and superfluous differences.[35]

Although the same point of view is already vindicated in early Buddhism, gender plays nonetheless a decisive role here as well. Considering that the songs of the enlightened nuns, dating from the earliest Buddhist times, were delivered as part of the official Pali Canon, the capability of women for enlightenment was nevertheless put into question from the beginning. Soma, one of the nuns whose testimony of enlightenment is preserved, obviously gives an answer to the ongoing debate by asking why the fact of being a woman should be an obstacle to "get to see the place that sages want to reach"; for her, "what counts is that the heart is settled and that one sees what really is" (*Therīgāthā* 60-62).[36] A widespread idea in Mahāyāna Buddhism is that a spiritually developed woman can achieve the highest grade of a being becoming Buddha only by change of sex, either spontaneously in the actual life, or in the imminent

[31] For example, cf. Fuad Kandil, *Blockierte Kommunikation: Islam und Christentum* (Berlin: LIT-Verlag, 2008), p. 299.

[32] Manu. *The Laws,* transl. Georg Bühler (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), p. 42 and 196.

[33] *The Bhagavad Gita,* transl. by Gavin D. Flood and Charles Martin (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2012), p. 76.

[34] The tradition of the Liṅgāyats presents an interesting exception to the restriction of equality to the religious realm only. Arising in the 12th century CE, the Liṅgāyats or Vīraśaivas (belonging to the large complex of Śaivite traditions) emphasize the equality of all human beings regardless of social class and gender. Among the social consequences derived from this ideal, there are the abolishment of castes, the rejection of female impurity, and the permit of the remarriage of widows (forbidden by brahmanical law). Cf. Birgit Heller, *Heilige Mutter und Gottesbraut: Frauenemanzipation im modernen Hinduismus* (Wien: Milena-Verlag, 1999).

[35] *Ibid.,* pp. 145f., 235-239.

[36] *Therigatha: poems of the First Buddhist Women*, transl. Charles Hallisey (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 45.

rebirth.[37] Besides that, there are traditions, like Zen Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism, which from the beginning argued against sexual discrimination and asserted that gender is irrelevant for enlightenment. In the meanwhile, the androcentric tendencies, being also evident in negative female stereotypes, are criticized by many Buddhist women and some Buddhist male authorities as well.[38]

Can Religions Contribute to Humanity?

The chain of associations built up by the terms autonomy, individuality, rationality, freedom of will, and self-responsibility is typical for the secular understanding of dignity and humanity. Most religious positions mark significant differences. Maybe with the exception of Theravāda Buddhism[39] and later Confucianism,[40] today's major religions represent heteronomic concepts of dignity. Dignity and humanity are not based on the individual but on a dimension beyond. It cannot, however, be necessarily deduced from this that the individual is of no importance. Moreover, all traditions discuss the issues of autonomy, freedom of will, and self-responsibility, but dignity and humanity seem to be largely independent from these qualities. Quite the same holds true for rationality. Of course, partly, religious traditions do stress the connections between dignity, humanity, and rationality. There have always been theologians and other religious experts having laid emphasis on the intellectual capacity of human beings. But reason has been mainly regarded as an instrument for the knowledge of God or the ultimate reality, respectively. Most often, and with regard to the vocation and destiny of human existence, however, rationality plays only a subordinate role. Rationality is relativized in favor of spirit, intuition, and wisdom, but just as much in favor of responsible action, solidarity, and interconnectedness. Thus, dignity and humanity are primarily not a matter of certain qualities or capabilities. Dignity and humanity are first and foremost regarded as terms of relationship. This is evident from the concepts of God's image, God's representative, God's share-holder, as well as from concepts related to fundamental cosmic connectedness which is expressed by the identification of *ātman* and *brahman*, the overcoming of

[37] Cf. Diane Y. Paul, *Women in Buddhism Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition* (Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press, 1979), pp. 166-179.

[38] Cf. for example Rita M. Gross, *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993); Karma Lekshe Tsomo (ed.), *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004).

[39] Nevertheless, even in Theravāda Buddhism the human capability to enlightenment (an equivalent to human dignity) does not lead to an automatic mechanism of self-liberation, but has to be understood as a process of spiritual growth which does not primarily depend on a person's own activities and strivings.

[40] The philosopher Mengzi (Meng-tzu, Lat. Mencius, ca. 370-290), whose work is said to represent best the moral substance of Confucian ethics, clearly expresses a general concept of man consisting in the idea of an innate human "nature." According to Mengzi, man is endowed with an intrinsic dignity – a so-called "good dignity" (*lianggui*) in contrast to the honor resulting of social position or personal achievements – which can be regarded as an equivalent to man's "heavenly rank/dignity" (*tianjue*). Thus, it seems to be "nature" or "heaven" (*tian*), respectively, conferring to every man a dignity within himself. In the book Mengzi, the original meaning of *tian* as a personal godhead has changed to a vague numinous connotation of this term. Therefore, the metaphysical and heteronomic basis of human dignity completely fades into the background pushing forward self-determination and moral autonomy. Cf. Heiner Roetz, "The 'Dignity within Oneself': Chinese Traditions and Human Rights," in Pohl, Karl Heinz (ed.), *Chinese Thought in a Global Context* (Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 1999), pp. 240-253; Gregor Paul, "Konzepte der Menschenwürde in der klassischen chinesischen Philosophie," in Ommerborn, Wolfgang et al. (eds.), *Das Buch Mengzi im Kontext der Menschenrechtsfrage* (Berlin: LIT-Verlag, 2011), pp. 51-67.

egoism, or the idea of the Buddha nature. Dignity and humanity are not linked to autonomy, but are embedded into relations and interdependences.

Compared with the prevailing understanding of human dignity, religions set different accents regarding rationality and individuality. Thus, the interreligious perspective could serve as a critical corrective to reductionism (in the sense of humans being more than just brain and the appreciation of dimensions such as emotionality, spirituality, sociability, and so on) and to individualism succumbed to the obsession of autonomy in modern Western cultures. Concerning the narrowing of humanity to anthropocentrism, Abrahamic religions do not offer alternatives to the mainstream of secular approaches. The idea of interconnectedness of the living beings, however, is deeply rooted in Hindu and Buddhist traditions and offers the theoretical and practical opportunity to deconstruct the dualistic spilt between humans and animals. In concrete ethical concerns, however, the practice of nonviolence and vegetarianism has not so much been dominated by the notion of the animals' dignity, but on the interests of improving the conditions of humans for their own salvation. The horizontal issue of androcentrism, running throughout the history of the religious as well as the secular concepts of dignity and humanity,[41] makes clear just how difficult it is to even respect all human beings as equal in dignity and to concede them full humanity.

So far, humanity has not been fully realized. The history of religions demonstrates the problems involved by taking religious values as the benchmark for humanity. Often enough religions themselves have been used to legitimate inhuman thought and practice. Thus, there exist good reasons to protect human beings from any kind of evaluation by a secular concept of autonomy,[42] but there is no basis, however, for humanity in the sense of a reciprocal togetherness of all living beings. Human societies are dominated by selfish interests of social, ethnic, or religious groups, and human beings have laid claim to space and resources provided by the planet earth and even beyond. Religions have at least partly legitimized the pretensions of humankind or a privileged part of it. Nevertheless, religious traditions also comprise approaches to correct the human hybris. The Hindu myth of "Indra and the Ants" represents an impressive example of how that works:

Indra, the king of gods, troubles all other gods by his insatiable craving for bigger and more splendid palaces. Therefore, the gods are seeking help from the almighty God, Vishnu. Vishnu visits Indra in the disguise of a brahmanical boy. Because it always promises good fortune to invite a Brāhmaṇa – a member of the class of the priests – Indra is pleased to welcome the guest. Sitting with the proud Indra at dinner, suddenly, the boy starts smiling. Indra wants to know the reason for his behavior. Vishnu points at a parade of ants wandering through the hall, saying: "Once, each of them has been an Indra." (Vishnu declares that in a former birth each of them held the position of Indra.) Indra understands the message, repents, and turns to humility.[43]

---

[41] A straight line can be drawn starting from the Stoa – defining human equality as brotherhood based on the idea of participation in the *logos* – through to the proclamation of "Liberty, equality, fraternity" in the French Revolution and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."

[42] Walter Schweidler, "Asiatische Werte – asiatische Menschenrechte?" in Gareis, Sven Bernhard and Geiger, Gunter (eds.), *Internationaler Schutz der Menschenrechte: Stand und Perspektiven im 21. Jahrhundert* (Opladen & Farmington Hills, MI: Budrich, 2009), p. 184.

[43] Cf. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton, NJ: Bollingen Paperback Printing, 1974), pp. 3-11.

Bibliography

Babylonian Talmud, The: Tractate Kethuboth, transl. Samuel Daiches and Israel W. Slotki (Soncino Talmud Online: https://halakhah.com/pdf/nashim/Kethuboth.pdf) [10.05.2017].

Balasubramanian, R. 1985. "Die Stellung des Menschen in der Welt aus der Sicht des Hinduismus." In Panikkar, Raimundo and Strolz, Walter (eds.), *Die Verantwortung des Menschen für eine bewohnbare Welt im Christentum, Hinduismus und Buddhismus*, pp. 76-99. Freiburg i.B.: Herder.

Bhagavad Gita, The. 2012, transl. Gavin D. Flood and Charles Martin. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

Brück, Michael von. 2014. "Die Menschenwürde in verschiedenen Religionen und Kulturräumen." In Vogel, Beatrix (ed.), *Umwertung der Menschenwürde – Kontroversen mit und nach Nietzsche*, pp. 338-351. Freiburg/München: Alber.

Dietz, Walter. 1999. "Christus – der neue Adam. Wert und Würde des Menschen im Christentum." In Hoffmann, Herbert (ed.), *Werde Mensch. Wert und Würde des Menschen in den Weltreligionen*, pp. 91-120. Trier: Paulinus.

Gäng, Peter. 2002. *Buddhismus*. 2nd ed. Frankfurt a.M.: Campus-Verlag.

Gerlitz, Peter. 1998. *Mensch und Natur in den Weltreligionen: Grundlagen einer Religionsökologie*. Darmstadt: Primus-Verlag.

Gross, Rita M. 1993. *Buddhism after Patriarchy: A Feminist History, Analysis, and Reconstruction of Buddhism.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Hassan, Riffat. 1994. "Muslim Women and Post-Patriarchal Islam." In Cooey, Paula M. et al. (eds.), *After Patriarchy. Feminist Transformations of the World Religions.* 5th ed., pp. 39-64. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.

Heller, Birgit. 1999. *Heilige Mutter und Gottesbraut: Frauenemanzipation im modernen Hinduismus*. Wien: Milena-Verlag.

Heller, Birgit. 2017. "Symbols of Emancipation? Images of God/dess, Devotees and Transsex/gender in Hindu Traditions." *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 5/1, pp. 235-257.

Huber, Wolfgang. 1992. "Menschenrechte/Menschenwürde." In Müller, Gerhard (ed.), *Theologische Realenzyklopädie*, vol. 22, pp. 577-602. Berlin: de Gruyter.

Hurley, Scott. 2015. "Buddhismus." In Ferrari, Arianna and Petrus, Klaus (eds.), *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen*, pp. 60-62. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag.

Ilan, Tal. 1997. *Mine and Yours Are Hers. Retrieving Women's History from Rabbinic Literature.* Leiden: Brill.

Jensen, Anne. 2002. *Frauen im frühen Christentum.* Bern: Lang.

John Paul II, Pope. 1988. *Apostolic Letter: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year. Mulieris dignitatem*. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference.

Kandil, Fuad. 2008. *Blockierte Kommunikation: Islam und Christentum.* Berlin: LIT-Verlag.

Koran Interpreted, The. 1955, transl. Arthur J. Arberry. 2 Vols. London: Allen & Unwin – New York: Macmillan. 2 Vols.

Kraussen, Halima. 2015. "Islam." In Ferrari, Arianna and Petrus, Klaus (eds.), *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen*, pp. 178-180. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag.

Leisch-Kiesl, Monika. 1992. *Eva als Andere: eine exemplarische Untersuchung zu Frühchristentum und Mittelalter*. Köln: Böhlau.

Mall, Ram Adhar. 1997. *Der Hinduismus. Seine Stellung in der Vielfalt der Religionen.* Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Manu. 1988. *The Laws,* transl. Georg Bühler (The Sacred Books of the East 25). Reprint Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass.

Michaels, Axel. 2006. *Der Hinduismus: Geschichte und Gegenwart.* 2nd ed. München: Beck.

Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth. 1985. *Das Land, wo Milch und Honig fließt: Perspektiven einer feministischen Theologie.* Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn.

Once the Buddha Was a Monkey. Ārya Śūra's Jātakamālā. 1989, transl. Peter Khoroche. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Paul, Diane Y. 1979. *Women in Buddhism Images of the Feminine in Mahāyāna Tradition.* Berkeley, CA: Asian Humanities Press.

Paul, Gregor. 2011. "Konzepte der Menschenwürde in der klassischen chinesischen Philosophie." In Ommerborn, Wolfgang et al. (eds.), *Das Buch Mengzi im Kontext der Menschenrechtsfrage*, pp. 51-67 (Philosophie der Menschenrechte im interkulturellen Kontext Vol. 1). Berlin: LIT-Verlag.

Plaskow, Judith. 1991. *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective.* San Francisco, CA: Harper.

Ramet, Sabrina Petra (ed.). 1996. *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures. Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Remele, Kurt. 2015. "Christentum." In Ferrari, Arianna and Petrus, Klaus (eds.), *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen*, pp. 63-66. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag.

Remele, Kurt. 2016. *Die Würde des Tieres ist unantastbar. Eine neue christliche Tierethik.* Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker.

Rheinz, Hanna. 2015. "Judentum." In Ferrari, Arianna and Petrus, Klaus (eds.), *Lexikon der Mensch-Tier-Beziehungen*, pp. 187-189. Bielefeld: Transcript-Verlag.

Roetz, Heiner. 1999. "The 'Dignity within Oneself': Chinese Traditions and Human Rights." In Pohl, Karl Heinz (ed.), *Chinese Thought in a Global Context: a Dialogue Between Chinese and Western Philosophical Approaches*, 99. 236-261. Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill.

Schmidt-Leukel, Perry. 1999. "Das Boot der menschlichen Existenz. Zum Menschenbild im Buddhismus." In Hoffmann, Herbert (ed.), *Werde Mensch. Wert und Würde des Menschen in den Weltreligionen*, pp. 11-72. Trier: Paulinus.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. 1983. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins.* London: SCM Press LTD.

Schweidler, Walter. 2009. "Asiatische Werte – asiatische Menschenrechte?" In Gareis, Sven Bernhard and Geiger, Gunter (eds.), *Internationaler Schutz der Menschenrechte: Stand und Perspektiven im 21. Jahrhundert*, pp. 179-189. Opladen & Farmington Hills, MI: Budrich.

Seybold, Klaus. 2001. "Feindbild und Menschenwürde. Das Zeugnis der Psalmen." In Herms, Eilert (ed.), *Menschenbild und Menschenwürde*, pp. 307-319. Gütersloh: Kaiser, Gütersloher Verlagshaus.

Steiner, Gary. 2010 [2005]. *Anthropocentrism and Its Discounts: the Moral Status of Animals in the History of Western Philosophy.* Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Sunstein, Cass R. and Nussbaum, Martha C. (eds.). 2010. *Animal Rights: current Debates and New Directions*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Therigatha: poems of the First Buddhist Women. 2015, transl. Charles Hallisey. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press.

Tsomo, Karma Lekshe (ed). 2004. *Buddhist Women and Social Justice: Ideals, Challenges, and Achievements.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Visuddhi-magga oder der Weg zur Reinheit: die größte und älteste systematische Darstellung des Buddhismus. 1975. Transl. Nyanatiloka. 3rd ed. Konstanz: Christiani.

Volp, Ulrich. 2006. *Die Würde des Menschen. Ein Beitrag zur Anthropologie in der Alten Kirche*. Leiden: Brill.

Waal, Frans de. 2013. *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism Among the Primates*. New York: WW Norton.

Wadud, Amina. 2008. *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. Reprint Oxford: Oneworld.

Wielandt, Rotraud. 1993. "Menschenwürde und Freiheit in der Reflexion zeitgenössischer muslimischer Denker." Schwartländer, Johannes (ed.), *Freiheit der Religion. Christentum und Islam unter dem Anspruch der Menschenrechte*, pp. 179-209. Mainz: Matthias Grünewald-Verlag.

Wielandt, Rotraud. 2007. "Man and His Ranking in the Creation: On the Fundamental Understanding of Islamic Anthropology." In Bsteh, Andreas (ed.*), Islam Questioning Christianity: Lectures – Questions – Interventions*, pp. 78-82. Mödling: Verlag St. Gabriel.

Zimmer, Heinrich. 1974. *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell. 2nd ed. Princeton, NJ: Bollingen Paperback Printing.