

Brett G. Sharffs

“Human Dignity and Identity from a Latter-day Saint Perspective”

I’m grateful for the opportunity to share some of our recent work at the International Center for Law and Religion Studies relating to human dignity and identity from a Latter-day Saint perspective.

2018 marked the 70th Anniversary of the United Nation’s unanimous adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This was the first international human rights instrument, and it is the foundation of the human rights revolution that has taken place since the end of World War II.

For several years, we at the Center had been thinking about something meaningful we could do to commemorate this important anniversary – and also something that might refocus, refresh, and renew human rights discourse, which has become quite politicized, controversial, and divisive in recent years.

In January of that year, Ján Figel, who at the time was the European Union’s Special Envoy for Freedom of Religion and Belief, visited BYU Law School and we brainstormed about what we could do to celebrate the UDHR, and to help affect what Ambassador Figel has described as the need for “climate change” with respect to human rights discourse.

In his work, he found human dignity was a concept that was uniquely helpful in starting conversations, building bridges, and finding common ground in promoting freedom of religion around the world.

Indeed, human dignity was in an important sense the foundational idea of human rights. Consider this statement by General Douglas MacArthur at the time of the Japanese surrender at the end of World War II.

“It is my earnest hope, and indeed the hope of all mankind, that from this solemn occasion a better world shall emerge out of the blood and carnage of the past – a world dedicated to the dignity of man and the fulfillment of his most cherished wish for freedom, tolerance, and justice.”

But when the eighteen countries that comprised the UN Human Rights Commission in 1947 started the work of drafting the UDHR, they quickly reached an impasse. There were too many different ideas of where to start and what should be included.

Finally, one of the members of the drafting committee, PC Chang from China, recalled that the concept of human dignity had been mentioned in the preamble of the United Nations Charter. Perhaps we can start there, he suggested.

This broke the logjam, and focusing on human dignity helped the process of identifying, specifying, and articulating the 30 brief articles that comprise the final text of the UDHR.

The significance of human dignity is apparent from the very first sentence of the UDHR. The preamble begins by stating, “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world.”

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And the first Article of the UDHR declares: “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.”

Our efforts 70 years later culminated in a gathering at Punta del Este, Uruguay, where a group of 40 human rights experts from around the world gathered to complete a document enumerating the many practical ways that human dignity can help us navigate current human rights challenges.

For the drafters of the Punta del Este Declaration, we found, as had the founding figures of human rights 70 years earlier, that human dignity is a concept that is uniquely useful in finding agreement about human rights.

The key idea that we came to focus upon is the idea of human dignity for everyone everywhere. Over the past four years we have come to call this the “human dignity initiative,” and it has been at the heart of our work.

We believe that all human beings are endowed by their creator with inherent and inalienable human dignity. This dignity is the foundation for human rights, and one of the most powerful justifications for religious freedom for all.

We have created a website, dignityforeveryone.org, which includes information about the background, drafting, and content of the Declaration, as well as translations into a growing list of languages.

I also want to mention a new “coffee table” picture book we’ve produced to highlight and amplify the theme of human dignity for everyone everywhere.

This was just published in April of this year, and it features quotations from 100 of the signatories of the Punta del Este declaration about what human dignity means to them.

What we have found is that human dignity is an idea that is at once simple and clear but also rich and profound. Almost everyone has something interesting and insightful to say when you ask them what human dignity means to them. . . . I have come to view the perspectives on human dignity highlighted in this book as “points of light” not just illuminating our understanding of an important idea but also bringing light to a world that seems in darkness.

For example, Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, who passed away in 2020, said, “The ultimate value we should be concerned to maximize is human dignity – the dignity of all human beings, equally, as children of the creative, redeeming God.”

The Oxford theologian Andrew Teal notes, “These images of people of different cultures . . . remind us that declarations are not about our having a correct argument but are expressions of value and love.”

And Andrew Bennet, an Eastern Orthodox Christian, and Former Ambassador for Religious Freedom in Canada said this: “At the core of our humanity is the dignity that we bear. . . . It is transcendent and immanent. . . . Human rights must serve constantly to reaffirm a conviction in the inherent dignity of the person.”

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In 2019, we participated in a conference at Oxford University on Religious Perspectives on Human Dignity.

I contributed a chapter on Latter-day Saint perspectives. In that presentation, I selected one scripture from each book from the LDS canon of scripture that sheds light on human dignity. Some of these verses are shared by other religious traditions, and some are unique to the LDS scriptural canon.

Today, I'd like to share with you a brief synopsis of these reflections on human dignity and identity from a Latter-day Saint perspective.

As Elder Dallin H. Oaks put it in General Conference in 1995: "In the theology of the restored church of Jesus Christ, the purpose of mortal life is to prepare us to realize our destiny as sons and daughters of God—to become like Him . . . The Bible describes mortals as 'the children of God' and as 'heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ.' It also declares that 'we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together' and that 'when he shall appear, we shall be like him.'" As Elder Oaks says, "We take these Bible teachings literally."

First, the Old Testament. The fundamental truth about human beings shared by all of the Abrahamic faiths is found in the first chapter of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible, where it states that all human beings are created in the image of God. For Latter-day Saints, this is not a metaphor. We believe that God is a perfect embodied man, and that we are his spirit children, with a form and function modeled after Him. Sometimes I think Latter-day Saints don't fully appreciate how remarkable, even radical, this belief is, even within Christendom.

From the New Testament, I focused on scriptures emphasizing the relationship between our Savior Jesus Christ, and God the Father. One of the best known is Jesus Christ's intercessory prayer, where he cries out to God to let the cup pass from him, but ultimately submits to God's will. Latter-day Saints do not think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as engaging in a monologue or trying to resolve a conflict with himself. Rather, this is a son seeking unity with His Father. The unity of the Godhead is like the unity God's children should have with them – and with each other – a unity of purpose, but not a unity of identity.

While Latter-day Saints tend to focus on the inherent nature of human dignity, we also recognize a behavioral dimension of dignity—a part of dignity that comes from a righteous change of heart. This is a recurring theme throughout the Book of Mormon and one that is expressed in Alma's words, "This life is the time for men to prepare to meet God." Our dignity is magnified as we live in a way that prepares us to be reunited with our Savior and our Father in Heaven.

The Doctrine and Covenants further develops the LDS idea that this life is the time to prepare to meet God with the idea that this life is the time for God's children to prepare to become like Him. This theme is not unique to the Doctrine and Covenants; rather, it is consonant with doctrines found in the Bible and Book of Mormon. The Doctrine in Covenants, however, provides particularly powerful and compelling insights into the Latter-day Saint perspective on human dignity.

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Section 130: 1-2 says, “When the Savior shall appear we shall see him as he is. We shall see that he is a man like ourselves. And that same sociality which exists among us here will exist among us there, only it will be coupled with eternal glory, which glory we do not now enjoy.”

As Elder Joseph B. Wirthlin put it, “To know God is to think what he thinks, to feel what he feels, to have the power he possesses, to comprehend the truths he understands, and to do what he does. Those who know God become like him, and have his kind of life, which is eternal life.”

The Pearl of Great Price provides a portrait of God who is everything His children are only “perfectly so.” In the Book of Moses, the Old Testament prophet Enoch experiences a vision in which he is shown the sweep of human history and God’s plan for his children. This vision includes the birth, life, and atonement of Jesus Christ. Enoch then observes God weeping over the unrighteousness and suffering of many of his children and is taken aback by the Lord’s tears.

“And it came to pass that the God of heaven looked upon the residue of the people, and he wept; and Enoch bore record of it, saying: How is it that the heavens weep, and shed forth their tears as the rain upon the mountains?”

The LDS conception of God is a God who weeps – who is more like His children than God is often understood to be. Not only are we to become more like God, God is more like us than we sometimes realize.

And so to conclude . . . A fundamental belief in universal human dignity is interwoven throughout the theology of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is not something that is only received due to status or certain behavioral requirements but is, at its core, something that is innate and inalienable for all human beings. Elder James E. Faust said:

“I have seen human dignity and self-worth expressed eloquently in the lives of the humblest of the humble, in the lives of the poor as well as in the lives of the formally educated and the affluent. The fruits of the search for holiness in their lives have been transparent, expressed through their inner dignity, their feelings of self-respect and personal worth.”

The LDS scriptural canon is a key resource in understanding how Latter-day Saints think about human dignity and identity. The Old Testament and its emphasis on humankind being created in God’s image attests to both humans’ cosmic importance and the need to exercise humility. The New Testament shows the power and love in divine relationships through the Father and Son, the expectation of righteous conduct, and the crucial principle to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” The Book of Mormon introduces the possibility of God’s children having His image in our countenance while highlighting some of the behavioral aspects that exist within the grand concept of human dignity. The Doctrine and Covenants provides a glimpse into the LDS understanding of theosis, or eternal progression, the potential of each person to become like God. Lastly, the Pearl of Great Price crafts a portrait of a feeling God, a God who weeps, loves, and is more like His children than they realize.

It is my hope that a fundamental, universal belief in the worth souls can help build the bridges that need to be built, bring empathy where there is only apathy or worse, and begin to move society towards a brighter, more unified future.

Since I have been speaking of matters of faith and matters of the heart, I close in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.