

Religion, Human Rights and the Problem of Organizational Structure

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Abstract

This paper will seek to present an understanding of the historical conditions that make possible a convergence of the selected religious teachings and human rights, and ask the question if such a convergence can operate successfully within a hierarchal bureaucracy such as found in government or institutional religion. The paper will look at three specific case studies where there has been a convergence of human rights and religion and the resulting struggle to influence the behavior of the state: 1. the example of Christian liberation theology in South America in the 1960s and 70s. 2. The example of the movement Rabbis for Human Rights within the Israeli milieu from its founding in 1988 to the present. 3. The example of CAIR –The Council on American-Islamic Relations– which presently operates in the U.S.

Within the teachings of most great religious movements are found principles of behavior that support the concept of universal human rights. However, these principles are overshadowed when the religious teachings are enlisted to the needs of institutions, be they of the state or established religious hierarchies. The needs of institutions and hierarchical bureaucracies do not reflect universal human rights and the principles of behavior that underpin them. Rather, such institutions reflect the particular needs of interest groups and elites. These elites often are able to use ideology (which may be religious in nature) to cause their own special interests to be substituted for a community's more general needs and interests. As the rules of behavior narrow to accommodate institutional and bureaucratic dictates, universal human rights becomes the cause of minority groups and others on the margin of society seeking to reinterpret and broaden the definitions of what is humane and proper behavior. It is within this struggle to reinterpret rules of behavior along the lines of universal human rights that a convergence between religious teaching and human rights becomes most possible. But once again, this will happen as an alliance of those outside the dominant power structure. The three case studies given above demonstrate how this struggle from the margins has been fought in

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three contemporary arenas. A reasonable conclusion drawn from this is that supporters of universal human rights seem, ironically, condemned to never to attain the structural power necessary to enforce, on a universal scale, the practice of their principles. For, no such structural power exists that is designed to realize such universal ends. Thus, even on those rare occasions when champions of human rights manage to attain positions of power, they are always restrained, co-opted, or otherwise compromised by the institutional and bureaucratic matrices of power—all of which are typically designed to promote and protect particular, and not universal, interests. Thus, from an historical prospective, those promoting universal human rights, even when allied to or inspired by religious teachings, are condemned to always fight as outsiders. For to move inside is to transform universal principles into special interest dictates.

Keywords: Problems in Organizational Structure; Religious Study; Human Rights; Historical Conditions.

1. The Nature of the Problem

In the sacred texts of all the major monotheistic religions one can find statements and prescribed behaviors that both support and undermine the modern concept of human rights (here the contemporary standard is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights or UDHR). Calls for universal brotherhood, equality and justice are interspersed with divinely approved examples of behavior that cut believers off from non-believers, encourage self-aggrandizing in-group behavior and reward group militancy and fervor. The evolution and interpretation of rituals, symbols and sacred stories also tend to place emphasis on in-group specialness as against universal connections.

The presence of such mixed messages can help open the way to radically different interpretations of God's will for mankind and the structuring of rules of behavior to help believers realize that will. One can see this in the way such interpretations are translated into practice. Two classical paths or orientations come to mind. The more common one is the group or sect centered institutional and doctrinal orientation.¹ All "institutional religions" are examples of this type. As we will see, such an orientation often comes to reflect rule directed group/institutional needs that de-emphasize universal concepts such as human rights. The other orientation is a more mystical one within which group defining rules and doctrines are less important than seeking out universally attainable personal religious experience. For instance, in the Catholic tradition there is the story of Martha and Mary. In Jesus' presence Martha rushes about making the house presentable, cooking a meal and washing Jesus's feet, etc. while Mary simply sits at his knee and listens to him preach.² Martha has come to stand for the religious "administrator," while Mary stands for the "mystic or sufi." For our purposes, it is the organizational and rule oriented approach of the "Marthas" that is important.

If a prophetic message is to lay the basis for a successful religious movement its adherents must evolve some kind of organization. If the religious organization grows significantly along institutional lines it is fated to follow the developmental patterns of other large institutions. As Max Weber demonstrated, the very nature of large organizational structures is a bureaucratic one. "The needs of mass administration make it [bureaucracy] today completely indispensable." (Weber, 1968: 224)

1. It was William James who noted that "men...intellectualize their religious experience" through "formulas" that are easily incorporated into bureaucratic structures. See: James, 1999: 500.

2. See: Luke, 10: 38-42.

Of course, bureaucracy is not a one dimensional phenomenon. Contemporary research on organizational theory and practice has shown that there are multiple ways bureaucracies can be put together and directed.¹ Nonetheless, most large organizations evolve some form of hierarchy and sub-hierarchies, and with them come the likely development of entrenched leadership cadres with specific interests of their own. As organizations become more structured and hierarchical their doctrines and goals become subject to ever more specific interpretations by these leadership cadres. In the case of centralized religious institutions, these will be “Marthas”- the men who understand the religion and its goals in administrative terms- that is, in terms of rule governed notions of faith and behavior. These rules become the dominant criteria that define membership in the religion and they will, of necessity, emphasize group identification and cohesion. In practice, such rules will almost always take precedence over universal principles (such as human rights) that transcend the leadership’s own bureaucratic and interpretive authority.

The following few examples are given not to pass judgment on the rightness or wrongness of the positions taken by dominant groups within religions, but rather to show that there are serious practicable consequences when concepts such as “equality” and “rights” are given group specific as against universal interpretations. Thus, an interpretation of equality that states that (using UDHR language) “everyone has the right to take part in the government of his [or her] society, directly or through freely chosen representatives” might, if applied in practice, undermine a male dominated hierarchy that interprets its sacred texts and stories in ways that discourage female participation in leadership. Just so, an interpretation of justice which demands equality before the law regardless of “race, color, sex, language, religion” and so on might well undermine the established interpretation of male preference in the rights of inheritance as well as the weight of female testimony as presently construed in some Islamic courts. It would also negate the present discriminatory application of law within the state of Israel. Elites (and the interest groups that they serve) are loath to give up their interpretative dominance of the rules of group behavior just because someone else has a broader notion of human rights.

In sum, expanding organization most often leads to professionalized leadership cadres or elite interest groups which then interpret the rules of behavior (as well as, in the case of religious organizations, rituals, symbols, principles of faith, and

1. See: Maggio, 1998: 7ff.

sacred stories) in ways that reinforce their own positions of power. By monopolizing the interpretation of the doctrines, goals and needs of the organization, those aspects of the institution become extensions of the goals and needs of the leadership itself. It is their positions and interpretations that become "orthodox." In most cases, the structural nature of the bureaucracy leads its administrative apparatus to automatically enforce the particular interpretations of the leadership.¹ In this way centralized and hierarchical bureaucratic organizations become more narrow in focus rather than more encompassing. Principles that reflect universal needs and goals often appear in variance with the specific ends sought by dominant elite interest groups. Just as mystics and sufis, who often have to a broader world view, are looked upon with suspicion by the 'Marthas'—the administratively dominant, orthodox religious elites—so concepts of human rights that appear to undercut group solidarity based on orthodox principles will be considered dangerous.

If this is so, a "convergence of religion and human rights" is not likely to be found among bureaucratic religious establishments that are hierarchically organized and have a centralized leadership. We must look elsewhere for more likely convergence candidates. Such candidates may be religiously oriented organizations that are small, decentralized, more or less democratically run, and stand apart from or opposed to the powers that run governments and their allied organizations (religious or otherwise). It is for most of these small, often dissenting groups, that human rights is an important defense of their own right to exist.² Let us take a look at three such "convergence friendly" organizations.

2. Case Studies

2.1. The Case of Liberation Theology and the Catholic Church

Liberation theology was predominately a movement of left leaning Catholic clergy and laity who sought to base their understanding of religion on "bottom up praxis" rather than "top down orthodoxy." Most

1. See: Max Weber is again insightful here. "The apparatus (bureaucracy) with its peculiar impersonal character...is easily made to work for anybody who knows how to gain control over it. A rationally ordered system of officials continues to function smoothly after the enemy has occupied the area: he merely has to change the top officials." See: Grath and Mills (eds), 1958: 229.

2. It should be noted at this point that this author is not inferring that the poor, dispossessed and vulnerable "somehow represent a more authentic expression of universal human rights." What is being asserted is that the claim to universal human rights is more compatible with the needs and interests of such groups, than with those of the leadership cadres of centralized, bureaucratic organizations be they religious or non-religious.

active in the 1960s through 1980s, the movement has its intellectual roots in the works of two Catholic theologians, both tireless proponents of human rights. The most influential was Father Gustavo Gutierrez, a Peruvian theologian and Dominican priest. He is often referred to as the “father of liberation theology.” Gutierrez spent many years living and working among the poor of Lima, Peru and came to interpret the Christian gospels in a way that supported the causes of political, social and economic betterment. In his major work, *A Theology of Liberation*, he encouraged the founding of “basic Christian communities” (sometimes known as ecclesial base communities) within the slums of Latin America. These communities would interpret the Bible and God’s message primarily in light of their own conditions. In other words, serious adherence to Christian principles required one to work for human rights starting with those of the poor and dispossessed. The second Catholic thinker that helped give rise to liberation theology was Leonardo Boff. Boff is a Brazilian theologian and philosopher who was ordained a priest in the Franciscan Order in 1964. He defines human rights as “the rights to life and the ways to maintain them with dignity” which requires first and foremost movement toward economic justice. Boff has found recognition in academic circles and from human rights organizations.

Taking their lead from writings of Gutierrez and Boff, those who practiced liberation theology, particularly in the environment of South and Central America found themselves increasingly in conflict with the right wing governments then in power. This was, perhaps, inevitable for the poverty and injustice that they sought to alleviate was not a mere consequence of original sin, the alleged laziness of the masses, or the natural order of things. It was judged by the liberation theologians to be the consequence of a class based society and its manner of distributing resources. This outlook led the followers of liberation theology to reject the standard “gospel of submission” which required “resignation to God’s will in a way that reinforced the belief that the present distribution of wealth and power comes from God.” (*Basic Principles of the Theology of Liberation*)¹ They formed the small and decentralized grassroots organizations urged by Gutierrez and began organizing the poor. This led not only in the direction of self-help projects, but also to heightened political awareness and increasing protest. As a result they were labeled Marxists and communists and not a few of them ended up jailed and/or murdered.

Their interpretation of the gospel as a message that called for the material rehabilitation of the poor also brought followers of

1. Available at: <http://www.socinian.org/liberty.html>.

liberation theology into conflict with the established Catholic Church. It is of interest that the cleric who led the fight against liberation theology in the name of orthodoxy was the then Cardinal Ratzinger (who in the 1980s led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith), and who is presently Pope Benedict XVI. Also active in this fight was his predecessor, Pope John Paul II who, as Bishop Karol Wojtyla, had supported the Polish people in their fight for political and economic reforms against a Soviet controlled government. This sympathy was not transferred to the capitalist settings of South and Central America.

It is to be noted here that the liberation theologians did not seek to overthrow the hierarchical structure led by the Pope and Ratzinger. Rather they sought to re-compose the establishment's understanding of human rights according to their interpretation of the gospel, and focus Church energies on the practice and defense of those rights among the poor. Why did the likes of John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger find this unacceptable? It is true that much of the Catholic Church leadership in South and Central America has historically been allied to the class structure of its society. Yet it is also the case that as many of the *local Catholic prelates* acted sympathetically toward the liberationist theology as those that opposed it.¹ But as one moved away from the local scene, so to speak, the opposition that arises within the Church establishment is not based on a class fear of a more equalitarian redistribution of economic resources. It is rather based upon a fear of losing organizational dominance based on a hierarchical claim to the exclusive right to interpret doctrine (that is organizational rules of belief and conduct).

Thus the arguments against liberation theology offered by Ratzinger and John Paul II reflect the reasoning of representatives of the dominant elite of an ideologically based hierarchical organization to a challenge from "the periphery." The liberation theologians were acting too independently and precipitously, justifying their actions with a reading of gospel that did not have clearance from their superiors. For instance, John Paul II saw Gutierrez and Boff's messages as a challenge to his institutional authority. He insisted that he, as Pope, was the Church's "universal pastor" and that the "popular," democratic concept of the Church, as represented by the grassroots organizations formed by liberation theology activists, was illegitimate.² Cardinal Ratzinger reflected the same fear of, what appeared to him, as a challenge to the

1. See: Jean-Pierre Cloutier, "Theologies: Liberation vs. Submission", Available at: <http://www.cyberie.qu.ca/jpc/haiti/theology.html>.

2. Pope John Paul II denounced these "popular churches" during a trip to Managua, Nicaragua. See Jean-Pierre Cloutier, "Theologies: Liberation vs. Submission", Available at: <http://www.cyberie.qu.ca/jpc/haiti/theology.html>.

hierarchical nature of the church. He labeled the liberation theology activists as “too secular” and warned that their movement threatened to introduce the “hate and violence” of class conflict into the Church itself. This, he asserted, would necessarily lead to a rejection of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.¹⁰

In this case study the liberation theologians, who stood apart from the dominant elite that controlled the Catholic Church, found it necessary and natural to interpret universal human rights as an aspect of the true meaning of the gospel, and demand that it be put into actual practice. Just as readily, this position was soon recognized as a challenge by those who controlled the Church’s power structure. This power structure rests on the rules and doctrines of a bureaucratic hierarchy that happened to preach a kind of divinely sanctioned inequality. Most importantly, an inequality as to the rights of interpretation and command. If there was to be a talk of human rights, much less its realization, it had to come from the established leadership and conform to the doctrines of the established system they controlled.

2.2. The Case of Rabbis for Human Rights and the Israeli State

The organization Rabbis for Human Rights (RHR) was founded in 1988 by David Forman, an American born and ordained Rabbi. RHR came into being as a response to the “serious abuses of human rights by the Israeli military authorities in the suppression of the (first) Intifada.”¹ Presently, it is made up of some one hundred Reform, Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Orthodox rabbis (all of whom are Israeli citizens) under the leadership of its Executive Director, the well-known peace activist Arik Ascherman. Ascherman, also American born, has focused much of, though not all, the organization’s energies on fighting the on-going policy of home demolitions directed against Palestinians by the Israeli government. In addition, RHR seeks to protect Palestinian rights by opposing the construction of the “separation wall,” and the uprooting of olive trees and orchards. It champions the human rights of foreign workers in Israel and seeks economic justice for the poor of Israel on a non-denominational basis. It has concerned itself with women’s issues and the state of health care for all. It has taken a position against Palestinian terror as well as the state sponsored terror of Israel.

Calling itself the “rabbinic voice of conscience in Israel,” RHR asserts that the universal promotion of human rights within Israel and the Occupied Territories is a true reflection of the Judaic tradition. “We believe that when our texts speak of the people of

1. See: Rabbis for Human Rights, Available at: <http://www.rhr.israel.net/index.shtml>.

Israel as a 'light unto the nations' or say of the seed of Abraham that 'in you all the families of the Earth will be blessed,' they are to be understood in a broad universalistic sense, and not narrowly interpreted as a justification for selfish tribalism."¹ Implicit in this statement is assertion that some of the practices of Israeli state constitute a perversion of that tradition.

Because RHR is a small group, it is not bureaucratically structured and has no centrally enforced set of rules. It can run more or less on the basis of consensus. Standing in opposition to the state and its use of power, respect for human rights becomes its cause with no contradiction in terms of vested interests and claims to power and authority. Its reputation as an organization of high integrity and good works gives it access to a large number of complimentary organizations which rally to support RHR as it comes into predictable confrontation with the Israeli state. For example, when Arik Asherman, as well as others, were arrested in 2004 for attempting to prevent the destruction of Palestinian homes in Jerusalem it was both RHR's reputation and his personal humanitarian status that drew worldwide attention and support.

During the time of Asherman's trial, Rabbi Brian Walt, the director of the North American support group for Rabbis for Human Rights commented that Asherman is "totally devoted to the moral heritage of the Jewish people, and that is precisely why the Israeli government is prosecuting him."² Whether this is literally true or not, Asherman and the RHR represent a human rights challenge to the Israeli state because they insist on an adherence to their interpretation of "moral heritage" regardless of the ideological positions of those elites which control the state and its institutions.

The governing elite, of course, claims that Israel is a democratic and humane state, and can they can point to structural legal documents which put forth many of the principles that RHR defends. For instance, Israel has a *Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty* that came into existence in March of 1992. It purports to protect Israeli citizens in, among other categories, their life, liberty and property. Yet the State of Israel, like the Catholic Church, is a large, centralized and bureaucratically structured organization with myriad rules of conduct and ends defined by the need for organizational survival. Such survival takes precedence over other principles whether they reflect "Jewish

1. Available at:
http://www.rhr.israel.net/profile/new_directions_old_directions.shtml.

2. Available at: http://www.jewishsf.com/content/2-0-/module/displaystory/story_id/21274/format/html/edition_id/434/displaystory.html.

moral heritage” or not. Thus, the words of *Basic Law: Human Dignity and Liberty* are qualified with the following notation, “When a state of emergency exists...emergency regulations may be enacted...to deny or restrict this Basic Law....”¹ Israel has spent much of her national existence under a “state of emergency.” Former Foreign Minister Shimon Peres put it this way in September of 2001 when he told a gathering of the Israeli diplomatic corps that “when we are talking about human rights, the first human right is to stay alive, because if you kill somebody, the rest of human rights are irrelevant and unimportant. For 53 years, Israel has been forced to exercise the right to remain alive.”²

From the standpoint of large organizations led by dominant interests groups through the apparatus of hierarchy, bureaucracy and ideology, human rights are legitimate only if they support institutional needs. That is, if they are compatible with the organization’s rules, doctrines, and goals. If some or all human rights are not compatible they may be labeled mistakes in the interpretation of doctrine (as with the Catholic Church) or, as in the case of Israel, unaffordable moral niceties in the midst of endless crisis. Thus, if you approach such organizations like a prophet or reformer preaching a certain set of values, the dominant interest groups will judge your statements by criteria attuned to organizational survival—that is their survival. Like the liberation theologians, the message and actions of Rabbis for Human Rights has been deemed a challenge from “the periphery”.

In the case of the Catholic Church it was the ability of the Pope and his ecclesiastical officers to assert exclusive right of interpretation of rules and doctrine that allowed them to overcome liberation theology. The Zionist parties of Israel (be they of the left or right) constitute competing interest groups all of which are defending the ideological nature of the Israeli state. Their competition is for who will command the power to interpret the rules and doctrines of that ideology and choose its tactics of defense and offense. If you will, the state’s emergency clause stands in for Papal infallibility and allows the prevailing Israeli elite to dismiss law and principle altogether in the name of organizational survival. If you take a position against the interpretations of reality offered by the Zionist parties you cease to be a true Israeli patriot and become, in the case of Asherman, a “persistent embarrassment” who can be “attacked by club-wielding

1. Available at:
http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFAArchive/1990_1999/1992/3/Basic+Law+Human+Dignity.

2. Available at:
<http://www.mfa.gov.il?MFA/Government/Speeches%20by%20Israeli%20leaders?2001>.

Jewish settlers” with impunity.¹

Rabbis for Human Rights is not a serious threat to the survival of the Zionist state. Therefore, one can ask why the dominant elites that control the Israeli state see the organization as an “embarrassment” and subject its members to vigilante violence? It is suggested here that the answer has less to do with fear of the RHR’s support of the Palestinians than with fear of an outside group’s attempt to reinterpret Zionist rules of behavior in a way that is starkly in contrast to that of the ruling elites. Those elites appear to be acting in defense of their assumed hierarchal right to interpret doctrine.

2.3. The Case of the Council on American Islamic Relations and the U.S. Government

The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) was founded in 1994 by a small group of Muslims who saw the need for an organization that would “promote a positive image of Islam and Muslims in America.” It is a small and relatively decentralized organization of some 30 chapters in 19 US states and Canada. It does have a governing board that offers guidance and logistical support to its chapters. It employs 70 full time staff who work in areas such as governmental affairs, civil rights, media relations and research. It is the largest Muslim grassroots advocacy group and has three major goals: “enhancing understanding of Islam, promoting justice and empowering American Muslims.”²

In this endeavor CAIR has established links to major American civil liberties and human rights groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union and The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), among others. It also has established dialogues with selected religious organizations of Christians and Jews. It keeps a data base on the violation of the civil and human rights of Muslim Americans and reacts vigorously both in terms of legal action and public protest to address these wrongs. Most of those who run CAIR and its chapters have a genuine interest in tolerance and diversity and, because they seek to organize and represent a minority population at some risk, the promotion and defense of human rights is a natural and necessary means to that end. To the extent that human rights advocacy becomes stronger in the United States, the position of CAIR and its leadership becomes stronger. To date the CAIR leadership have done very well and have established their organization as one of the major civil liberties/human rights groups in the United States.

1. See: McGreal, March 25, 2005.

2. See: This information is available on the CAIR website at www.cair.com.

This status has given CAIR leaders periodic access to government personnel and politicians at local, state and federal levels. This access is a direct response to CAIR's success in "empowering American Muslims." That is, the organization reacted to the deteriorating situation in the Middle East, and particularly the episode of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, by politically mobilizing US Muslims. The organization, through its chapters, has successfully heightened political consciousness, registered Muslims to vote, and made an effort to see that they do so as a bloc. This is the type of activity that implies growing electoral power to politicians and so they pay attention.

Its status has also allowed it to work on an amiable basis with most American security agencies such as the FBI, state and local police, and the US armed forces. These agencies have sought the help of CAIR and its chapters because its access to and influence in the American Muslim community can facilitate their own ends of surveillance and interdiction in the so called "war on terrorism." CAIR has decided to respond positively to these approaches and has, in its turn, used them to initiate programs that promote a positive image of Muslims and a sensitivity to Islam among the personnel of the security agencies.

As this description makes clear, CAIR's position is different from that of the liberation theologians and Rabbis for Human Rights. It is a "mainstream" organization that seeks to advance the rights of a population most of whom are middle class folk who seek to find a secure place in "middle America." However, this status makes the groups all the more dangerous from the standpoint of CAIR's growing list of establishment allied enemies.

It is CAIR's very success that has engendered fierce opposition from quite powerful foes. The Israeli lobby has taken note of CAIR and its more vocal and extreme spokesmen have begun a campaign of slander against the organization and its leadership. The radical American Zionist spokesman Daniel Pipes has labeled CAIR "militant Islam's most aggressive political organization in North America."¹ Steven Emerson, a self-proclaimed "investigator of terrorists" who, by allying himself to the American Zionists, has become accepted in some US government circles as an "expert" on terrorist organizations, has asserted that CAIR is part of "the Hamas US network."² An Anti-CAIR website has been established specifically to pass off innuendo

1. See: Daniel Pipes's website at <http://www.danielpipes.org/blog/32>.

2. See: Emerson's testimony on "Money Laundering and Terror Financing" before the US Senate Committee on Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs, July 13, 2005.

and half-truths as proof of a pattern of criminal activity on the part of CAIR and its officers.¹

It has become commonplace within modern American culture for the government at all levels to present itself as a champion of human and civil rights. The founding documents of the nation have been interpreted so as to give an ideological basis for this claim. CAIR's insistence on the rights of American Muslim citizens would appear to be consistent with the government's public position. However, this notion of the state as a champion of human rights is theory that does not automatically translate into practice.² The reality is that the American government, its multi-hierarchical structure and massive bureaucratic departments, have long ago been captured by dominant elites whose goals are the maintenance of power and its use to serve the interest groups with whom they ally. Within this structure it would seem that, once more, human rights becomes a supportable concept only to the extent that it is compatible with the interests of the ruling elites. In this the United States is no different than the state of Israel or the Catholic Church.

There is now a struggle going on in the United States to determine if the claim to civil and human rights by American Muslims is indeed compatible with the interests of the ruling elites. The structure of the American government and the nature of its politics places particular importance on the organizational strength of lobby groups that seek to use their financial power and voting bloc potential as vehicles to shape public policy. Over time the power elites within the political parties and government bureaucracies have developed very close, almost symbiotic, relationships with some of the more powerful lobbies. The American Zionist lobby in its various organizational manifestations is among the most notable of this category. And, as the reaction of the American Zionists indicates, CAIR is seen as a serious and growing challenge to their position as one of these privileged allies.

CAIR's challenge is certainly exaggerated by the Zionists. Yet, it is the Muslim group's claim to interpret the rules of behavior (that is the ideal rights of Americans) to their advantage that is at issue. Even though CAIR's demands are couched in terms historically consistent with American ideals (for instance, equal opportunity and treatment under

1. Available at: <http://www.anti-cair-net.org>.

2. Moreover, as the case of American behavior in the "war on terror" (for instance, the widespread use of torture) and the occupation of Iraq, along with *carte blanche* support given to Israeli policies in Palestine demonstrates, there is a very wide and noticeable gap between the ideals of theory and actual practice.

the law) they are interpreted by Zionists and Islamophobes, both in and out of the government, as propaganda ploys in a life and death contest for the right to determine who has access to political power. Unfortunately, the American Zionists see this as a zero sum game. Any growth in CAIR's influence is seen as an absolute diminishment in the own influence in the halls of power.

3. Conclusion

There is a natural tendency for the leaders of organizations to interpret the institution's doctrines and goals in a manner that promotes their own power positions and interests. The more centralized and hierarchical the organization, and the more bureaucratic its structure, the more entrenched its leadership is likely to become. This strengthens its ability to prescribe "orthodoxy" in its own terms. Religious organizations are not immune to this tendency. And, this proclivity will minimize the possibility of any convergence of the elite driven goals of such organizations with universalist concepts such as human rights unless those concepts are seen as somehow promoting the power of those who control the organization.

As the three case studies given above suggest, the possibility of a convergence of religion and human rights is greatest among smaller religiously oriented groups that do not have entrenched elites that seek to maintain control through doctrinal interpretation and bureaucratic manipulation. It is also important to note that, because of the universalist nature of the message of human rights, it is a concept most compatible with the needs of groups that stand outside of the main currents of power and seek to ally themselves with other outsider groups. These groups often include, but are not restricted to, the poor and dispossessed, and the politically and/or religiously vulnerable.

This paper has concerned itself with institutional problems that can hamper the convergence of religion and the advocacy of human rights. These problems are structural and would confront any organization, religious or otherwise, that evolves in a hierarchical and centralized fashion. There are, however, two additional comments left to make. First, with foresight and vigilance organizers of new and growing institutions seeking to promote human rights ought to be able to at least minimize and control these problems. As noted above, bureaucracies are not one dimensional and there are always groups experimenting with ways to make their structures more democratic

and encompassing.¹ Second, problems inherent in the structure of centralized and hierarchal organizations are not the only ones that can get in the way of a successful convergence of religion and human rights. In 2004 the Harvard Professor of Law David Kennedy brought out a book entitled *The Dark Side of Virtue*.² Basing much of the volume on his own experience working in the field of international human rights, Kennedy itemizes the myriad number of pitfalls that can get in the way of those who organize to promote the human rights of others. Beyond the problems of organization, many of these pitfalls are psychological, cultural, legal, and even linguistic.

Despite all, human rights must be maintained as a major cause of civil society and pressure must be kept on the bureaucratic institutions that run our governments, economies and religions too, to take into consideration the issue of all people's basic rights and needs. Whatever the problems and pitfalls of organizing to achieve these ends, a world without such efforts would be much more dangerous and cruel place.

1. See: The work *Sacred Companies...* cited above has many insights into the varieties of influences that can cause religious organizations to take different forms. See: Williams and Demerath III, 2003: 364ff.
2. See: Kennedy, 2004.

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