



# WHO ARE YOU? REAFFIRMING HUMAN DIGNITY

OCTOBER 28<sup>TH</sup>, 2019

  
CARDUS RELIGIOUS  
FREEDOM INSTITUTE



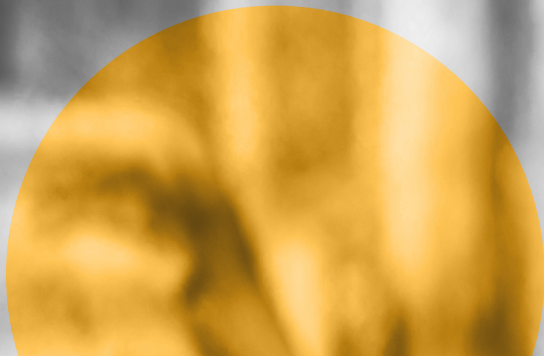
## **ABOUT CARDUS**

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The CRFI educates Canadians about the importance of religious freedom to a deeply pluralist society. Through its work, the CRFI asserts that it is the fundamental right of all people, and their communities and institutions, to freely live out their most deeply held beliefs as they inhabit the public square.



## *Part 1: The Meaning of Human Dignity*

### **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HUMAN?**

How do we know who we are? What is at the core of our personhood?

Unlike humans, animals make decisions solely from biological instinct. Let us consider a black bear. It's late autumn, and your average black bear is starting to forage around for the winter that is storming toward him. His den is cold and empty, the walls bare of art, the floor is without a carpet. This is a bear who is thinking only about one thing, and that is his stomach: insects, berries, roots, fish, or maybe even decaying fellow animals are what capture his attention. The bear is not inventing new ways to make this ancient process go more smoothly. He's not seeking to beautify his den by painting frescoes on the den walls. He's not reflecting, as he shambles through the woods, about why everything is so unfair or how he could streamline this process for maximum efficiency. He's a bear, and glorious in his way because of that, but he's not you and he's not me. He's not human.

Aristotle described human beings as rational animals. Like other animals, humans pursue survival, reproduction, and material welfare. However, human beings also have qualities that separate them from animals, including the capacity to contemplate why they act in certain ways, to evolve how they act, and to desire understanding of what exists beyond themselves and within themselves. According to Aristotle, humans have "rational souls." In other words, we are rational by nature. In the ancient understanding, reason is not simply the ability to score high on an IQ test or solve a math problem. The Greeks understood reason more broadly as the *capacity* for self-control, self-reflection, and self-awareness even at a young age. Only people can direct their own behaviour by reflecting on the life they want to live.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, human beings are understood to be created in the image and likeness of God and to be called into a relationship with God through our capacity for self-transcendence. Put simply, we possess the capacity to think beyond our immediate needs and to contemplate what exists beyond us, such as God and the overall meaning of things. As creatures, humans possess a three-part nature: we are body, mind, and soul. Humans have two different characteristics: material, “linked to the world by the body,” and spiritual, “open to transcendence and to the discovery of more penetrating truths thanks to the intellect.”<sup>1</sup> Judaism and Christianity understand that to be human means to have the ability to comprehend, approach, and encounter God, who made us in his image and likeness. In contrast to other animals, only humans have a relationship with God, a relationship that is based on our personhood and through which we desire communion with God. For Christians, our individual personhood is a reflection of the three persons of the Holy Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—the Godhead, three in one. Because God is personal, so is the creature made in his image. The Godhead is the prototype of personhood, revealing the need for community between persons for there to be a wholeness to the individual person. We need each other. As with the Holy Trinity, human beings are persons because they exist not as lone individuals but as part of a whole. Indeed, our very origin as human beings depends on the presence of others: a mother, a father. Through the Incarnation, God became human in Jesus Christ; our humanity has been taken up into the divine nature, forever, in the second person of the Trinity. As the Athanasian Creed states, “Not by the conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by assumption of the Manhood into God.”

*A single human soul is of more worth than the whole universe of bodies and material goods. There is nothing above the human soul except God.*

—Jacques Maritain<sup>2</sup>

Finally, through our intimate relationship with the Word of God, the Creator of all things, human beings serve as co-creators in the world. We make things. This can be found most intimately in how we bring new human life into the world. We also design and fashion new technologies for creating physical buildings and non-physical structures such as systems of government. We co-create when we discern beauty and take delight in it through the creation of great works of art, music, and literature. Such beauty expresses our deepest longings for meaning.

*Since something of the glory of God shines on the face of every person, the dignity of every person before God is the basis of the dignity of man before other men.*

—Catholic social teaching<sup>3</sup>



*I don't ask you to believe in God or not believe in God. . . . But I do ask you to believe that you have a soul. There is a piece of your consciousness that has no shape, size, weight, or color. This is the piece of you that is of infinite value and dignity.*

—David Brooks<sup>4</sup>

## WHAT IS IT ABOUT ME THAT GIVES ME DIGNITY?

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, human dignity comes from God's act of creation. God made human beings in his own image and likeness, and human dignity is thus grounded for Jews and Christians, acting as a key focus of unity between the two faiths. However, even people who doubt God's existence believe human beings have inherent value: some attribute or indiscernible quality that gives him or her ultimate worth. Here we are reminded that human beings are not objects to be used but subjects to be loved, and that coming into communion with one another in our common life reveals this reality of human dignity to us. A human being is not just some *thing*, a human being is *someone*.

Humans have a natural capacity for self-transcendence. Catholic philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand wrote that humans have "spiritual 'organs' such as the powers of knowing, willing, loving."<sup>5</sup> Only human beings can rise above the struggle for physical survival faced by other creatures (remember our friend the bear) and the preoccupations of everyday life to reflect on their lives, the world around them, and the meaning of existence. Austrian psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor

Frankl wrote, “The essentially self-transcendent quality of human existence renders man a being reaching out beyond himself.”<sup>6</sup>

This capacity for moving out from ourselves to others in whom we are called to encounter a shared dignity—and to God—is an important part of human dignity. Moreover, the *ability* people have to reach beyond themselves also implies the *responsibility* to do so. Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish thinkers of the twentieth century, emphasized the “demand” that comes with being born human.<sup>7</sup> Becoming fully human requires living a truly human life. A life that is open to what lies beyond the self. “Being a person,” he wrote, “depends upon being alive to the wonder and mystery that surround us.”<sup>8</sup> Heschel makes it clear that pursuing truth and meaning is humanizing, and essential to living a life worthy of the dignity humans have. For those who espouse a philosophical belief without God, belief in human dignity may still be evident in their desire to work for a more just and compassionate society.

*I will never tire of repeating this: what the poor need the most is not pity but love. They need to feel respect for their human dignity, which is neither less nor different from the dignity of any other human being.*

—St. Teresa of Calcutta<sup>9</sup>



## **IS MY HUMAN DIGNITY SOMETHING EXTERNAL OR INTERNAL?**

Different groups throughout history have held variously demeaning attitudes toward other groups, and viewed people of different races or religions as inferior. Up until the mid- to late-twentieth century under Jim Crow in the southern United States and under apartheid in South Africa, the belief that blacks and people of colour were somehow less human than whites of European origin was reflected

in law. Similar laws or societal attitudes at different points in human history and in different countries have sought to dehumanize or diminish the humanity of a person because of their ethnicity, their religious beliefs, or their economic or social status. We can cite here the attitudes of Hutus toward Tutsis in Rwanda and Burundi that contributed to the Rwandan genocide in 1994. The forced assimilation of Koreans under Japanese rule during the first half of the twentieth century is another recent example of how one ethnic group denied the dignity of another.

Such racialized views of human community were ultimately rejected when recognition of the inherent dignity of all persons became too widespread and powerful to ignore. These deeply prejudicial views were rooted in a lie: that a person's dignity is based on something external. Human characteristics such as ethnic background and skin colour vary from person to person but do not determine different levels of dignity. Regardless of our ethnic background, our sex, our religion, our wealth, or our poverty, we are all human and bear a dignity that is internal. Our dignity is within us. As we have already discussed above, in the Judeo-Christian understanding, we share a common human nature made in the image and likeness of God. As Shakespeare's Jewish moneylender Shylock cries in *The Merchant of Venice*,

*I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?<sup>10</sup>*

When we focus on one aspect of a human person that we do not like due to ignorance, prejudice, or malice, we falsely see that person's dignity as dependent on external features. We fail to see that the person in front of us bears the same dignity as ourselves: a dignity that is within.



*In the past there has been no lack of various reductionist conceptions of the human person, many of which are still dramatically present on the stage of modern history. These are ideological in character or are simply the result of widespread forms of custom or thought concerning mankind, human life and human destiny. The common denominator among these is the attempt to make the image of man unclear by emphasizing only one of his characteristics at the expense of all the others.*

—Catholic social teaching<sup>11</sup>

*...every man has a capacity to have fellowship with God. And this gives him a uniqueness, it gives him worth, it gives him dignity. And we must never forget this as a nation: there are no gradations in the image of God. Every man from a treble white to a bass black is significant on God's keyboard, precisely because every man is made in the image of God.*



—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>12</sup>

## DOES SOMEONE WITH A MENTAL OR PHYSICAL DISABILITY LACK OR HAVE LESS DIGNITY?

If we accept that dignity is not due to an external characteristic such as ethnicity, skin colour, or sex, then by extension we must also assert that our dignity is in no way diminished by a mental or physical disability, or even by grave illness. If human dignity is an interior reality we can recognize in one another despite external realities, then we have no less dignity if we are limited in our material body. At his annual Cardinal's Dinner in 2016, His Eminence Thomas Cardinal Collins, archbishop of Toronto, spoke about this fundamental truth about our dignity. "A person who drools has no less dignity than one who does not," he said. If we encounter someone with a broken leg, we do not consider her human dignity diminished, only her mobility. If we encounter a man who is blind, we don't consider him less human than we are but rather that he is living an equally valid life but without the full use of his sight. If we encounter a person with Down syndrome, do they have less dignity in our eyes? Of course not. For while they might experience intellectual and physical challenges, those challenges do not diminish the image and likeness of God impressed upon them.

*To be human is to accept who we are, this mixture of strength and weakness. To be human is to accept and love others just as they are. To be human is to be bonded together, each with our weaknesses and strengths, because we need each other. Weakness, recognized, accepted, and offered, is at the heart of belonging, so it is at the heart of communion with another.*

—Jean Vanier<sup>13</sup>





*Persons with disabilities are fully human subjects, with rights and duties: in spite of the limitations and sufferings affecting their bodies and faculties, they point out more clearly the dignity and greatness of man.*

—St. John Paul II<sup>14</sup>

## **IS IT POSSIBLE TO LOSE MY DIGNITY? WHEN I SUFFER, DO I HAVE DIGNITY?**

It is possible to make choices that display or that obscure, even contradict, your dignity. That is why we can speak of dignified and undignified behaviour. But as the dignity of your human nature is a gift bestowed by God, *that* is always yours. It is not possible to lose that sort of dignity, even by a decline in ability to do things, physical strength or beauty, or keenness of intellect. You do not have less dignity when you suffer, for suffering does not rob you of what belongs to your nature but may even serve to draw out its greatness and beauty. Suffering can be very difficult to endure, whether in ourselves or in those close to us. A human being has infinite worth because we are created in the image and likeness of God, which is much more than a physical or intellectual reality. There is unity between us as members of the human family, and we are in solidarity with one another, even more so where a fellow human being is suffering. But suffering can teach us much about dignity. It teaches us about the deep value of virtues such as patience, obedience, endurance, hope, and trust—all of which are unique to us as human beings.



*We all have suffering in common. Scratch the skin of any human being and you come upon some degree of helplessness, misery, or even agony. Being a person involves the ability to suffer himself, to suffer for others; to know “passio,” passion, as well as compassion.*

—Abraham Joshua Heschel<sup>15</sup>

## **HOW IS OUR FREEDOM OF RELIGION AND CONSCIENCE RELATED TO OUR DIGNITY AS HUMAN BEINGS?**

If we accept the dignity of the human person and all that it entails, as described above, then the human person is free by virtue of their humanity. Fundamental freedoms that relate to the rational actions of human beings, such as expression and association with others, must be inherent and pre-existing. The state has historically accepted this reality, as Canada does in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. These freedoms are not the gift of the state; they exist because of our humanity. The ability to freely exercise them can be constrained, yet due to their inherent character they can never be fully taken away. Religious freedom is bound together with other inherent freedoms, yet it has a unique character given its acknowledgment of the human person’s unique and profound search for meaning, truth, and God. Indeed, our ability to contemplate the transcendent is elemental to our humanity, as stated above. David Novak of the University of Toronto describes this as the “metaphysical need” of the human person; it is something that distinguishes us from other creatures, which don’t possess this same need.

Religious freedom is rooted in the fact that human beings have a natural desire to know the truth. Since human beings desire the truth, they must be free to search for it without state interference. Religious freedom, therefore, does not reflect an indifference toward truth but instead recognizes the inherent desire that each

person has *for* the truth and to live and be bound *by* the truth once they have discovered it. Such an understanding of religious freedom can be found in a variety of religious traditions. The Muslim scholar and former president of Indonesia Abdurrahman Wahid expressed it this way: “Indeed, the search for Truth (i.e., the search for God)—whether employing the intellect, emotions or various forms of spiritual practice—should be allowed a free and broad range. For without freedom, the individual soul cannot attain absolute Truth . . . which is, by its very nature, unconditional Freedom itself.”<sup>16</sup> Ultimately, freedom of religion protects the human duty to pursue truth, meaning, and God. Of course, the exercise of this freedom has reasonable limits: its exercise cannot violate the human dignity of another, for example, in advocating violence or abuse against those who hold different beliefs. It is bound together with the other fundamental freedoms, inherent to human beings, through which we are able to live fully as we are called to be: bearing the image and likeness of God in community with one another.

*For those who do not believe in God or who do not profess Christianity, if they do, however, believe in the dignity of the human person, in justice, in liberty, in neighborly love, they also can cooperate in the realization of such a conception of society and cooperate in the common good.*



—Jacques Maritain<sup>17</sup>



## *Part 2: Human Dignity and Autonomy*

### **HUMAN DIGNITY: WHERE ARE WE NOW?**

In response to the brutality of the Second World War, the United Nations General Assembly produced the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognized “the inherent dignity . . . of all members of the human family” as the “foundation” of human rights.<sup>18</sup> Even though the declaration saw human dignity as the basis of human rights, the declaration itself never defined the term.

Glossing over a definition has led to ambiguity. The 1993 Canadian Supreme Court case on assisted suicide, *Rodriguez v. British Columbia*, provides a legal example. Sue Rodriguez, a terminally ill patient with late-stage amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), argued that denying her access to assisted suicide violated her rights enumerated in the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. The court’s majority ruled that the law against assisted suicide was not a violation of Charter rights, while the minority argued that it was. In this case, *both* the majority and the minority cited human dignity to defend their different positions on assisted suicide. The majority argued that respect for “the intrinsic value of human life and on the inherent dignity of every human being” formed the basis of Canadian society. A “right to terminate one’s own life,” according to the majority, violated this intrinsic human dignity.<sup>19</sup> Justice Beverley McLachlin, however, argued in favour of a right to assisted suicide based on human dignity:

*Security of the person has an element of personal autonomy, protecting the dignity and privacy of individuals with respect to decisions concerning their own body. It is part of the persona and dignity of the human being that he or she have the autonomy to decide what is best for his or her body.<sup>20</sup>*

The majority argued that human dignity was inherent in the human person. Personal choice, while important, did not give an individual a right to violate his or her inviolable human dignity. However, when the assisted-suicide question was reopened in the 2016 *Carter v. Canada* case, McLachlin's version of human dignity won the day. The court decided that prohibiting assisted suicide denied people "the right to make decisions concerning their bodily integrity," which "is a matter critical to their dignity and autonomy."<sup>21</sup> This change in judgment reflects a change in the way society understands human dignity. For many today, dignity concerns the freedom to make personal choices, not the inherent value of human life.

## IS HUMAN DIGNITY ABOUT INDIVIDUAL AUTONOMY?

So there are at least two quite different understandings of human dignity today. The majority in the *Rodriguez* decision articulated an understanding of dignity already outlined in part one of this paper. Human dignity is innate and cannot be violated either by the state or by an individual choice to commit suicide. The *Carter* decision articulated a view that tries to ground human dignity in personal autonomy, understanding autonomy in terms of freedom to make choices according to what is valued.

There are several problems with the dignity-as-autonomy view. In reality, people have different levels of autonomy. Some will have better mental capabilities, more options, and be more independent than others. The inequality of autonomy has clear implications for human dignity. If people can have more or less autonomy, and if autonomy is directly associated with dignity, it follows that some people have more dignity than others. Grounding human dignity in the ability to make voluntary choices makes human dignity contingent on human ability, which relates to external factors. As Mark Penninga writes, "If human dignity is not intrinsic to our humanity but is a function of our choice-making, then only those who are able to make choices can be considered to have dignity and be worth protecting."<sup>22</sup> Following this principle, infants, people in unconscious states or who have developmental disabilities, or even the socioeconomically disadvantaged, have significantly less dignity than those who have the faculties and resources to choose the course of their own lives. Dignity becomes something the privileged have more of than the underprivileged. This understanding runs fundamentally counter to the Judeo-Christian understanding of the human person.

The dignity-as-autonomy position makes personal choice the highest good at the expense of other goods. In this view, nothing is inherently good. Things are good only if an individual chooses them. In the case of assisted suicide, the patient determines whether his or her life has value. If he wants to live, his life has value; if he wants to die, his life can be disposed of at will. The contrary view is that human life has inherent value. Human life does not have value because we choose it; we choose life *because* it has value. The same logic applies to human dignity. If a person's dignity rests on his or her ability to make free choices, then any choice a person makes would affirm that dignity. Even a person's choice to self-harm would be an exercise of human dignity, not a violation of it.

Human choice, or human freedom, is not an end in itself. Freedom must fit into the larger purpose of humankind. Plants fulfill their purpose by growing to their full organic potential. Animals fulfill their purpose by following their instincts. Humans fulfill their purpose through the *proper* use of their rational souls. Freedom is not simply the ability to choose. It is the ability to choose *rightly*.<sup>23</sup> A truly free person, Heschel wrote, has the ability to "act against his inclinations and in defiance of his own needs and desires" and choose the good.<sup>24</sup> In other words, freedom is not simply the ability to do whatever you want; it is the trained ability to push aside discomforts to choose what is objectively valuable.

## **HOW IS SOCIAL ISOLATION THAT MANY EXPERIENCE TODAY A PRODUCT OF A FLAWED UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN DIGNITY?**

It is no surprise that a society which defines freedom in terms of voluntary choice has a loneliness problem.<sup>25</sup> If freedom is personal choice, individuals end up making choices with little regard for the common good. Before long, people's choices conflict with each other. Instead of viewing others as fellow citizens working toward a common goal, people can view others as barriers to their freedom. Distrust grows. Societal bonds weaken. The distrust fostered by individual autonomy has a tendency to drive people apart and into social isolation. As journalist Shannon Gormley observes, "loneliness" is "the cost of privileging individual rights and freedoms over community values and cohesion." "When people are free to choose," she writes, "they may choose so differently from one another that they recognize nothing of themselves in each other."<sup>26</sup>



While individual freedom is important, personal freedom is something exercised in community with other people. Freedom is, as Pope Benedict says, “always a freedom shared with others.”<sup>27</sup> Without care for your neighbour, freedom becomes self-centred. When people think of freedom in terms of maximizing choice, people’s choices will naturally start to expand into their neighbour’s choices. When freedom is following a path toward honouring our humanity and our neighbour’s humanity, it is a path society can walk together, without forcing each other off the road.





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## Endnotes

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- 2 Jacques Maritain, *The Rights of Man and the Natural Law* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2012), 73.
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- 4 David Brooks, *The Second Mountain* (New York: Random House, 2019), 46.
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- 6 Viktor Frankl, *The Will to Meaning* (New York: Meridian, 1969), 8.
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- 8 Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom*, 55.
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- 15 Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom*, 24.

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- 17 Maritain, *Rights of Man*, 78–79.
- 18 UN General Assembly. (1948). Universal declaration of human rights (217 [III] A). Paris.
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- 21 Supreme Court of Canada, *Carter v. Canada*, 2016.
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- 23 See further Douglas Farrow, "Autonomy," chap. 7 in *Theological Negotiations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2018).
- 24 Heschel, *Insecurity of Freedom*, 14.
- 25 "Extreme Social Isolation and Loneliness Affect Almost One Quarter of Canadians," *Cardus*, June 17, 2019, <https://www.cardus.ca/news/news-releases/extreme-social-isolation-and-loneliness-affect-almost-one-quarter-of-canadians/>.
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- 27 Pope Benedict XVI, Lecture by the Holy Father at the University of Rome La Sapienza, 2008.

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