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What Secures Human Rights in a Secular World?

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How can we define and defend human rights in a secular world? If God is dead, what secures the *ought* of human rights and human dignity? This may be one of the most haunting questions of our times.

Writing in *Crisis*, Edward Feser argues that human rights cannot be sustained or secured in a secular context:

It's clear enough that the moral ideals that Western secularists value had—as a matter of historical fact—a theological origin. But could they not be given a foundation instead in some other, non-Judeo-Christian religious tradition—or in a purely secular philosophy? It doesn't appear so. For the dignity that the Western tradition has attributed to human beings derives entirely from the idea that their distinctive attributes—reason and free will, personhood and moral choice—reflect the very nature of the ultimate reality that is God Himself.

Further:

The idea that all human beings as such have an inherent dignity—and that this entails a doctrine of objectively valid, absolute, and universal human rights—seems to exist only in the Judeo-Christian West, and the moral (as opposed to economic or political) pressure other societies might feel to conform to this idea seems to come only from the West. Those who value these ideals, even if they are not personally religious, would seem therefore to have an interest in the continued health of the Judeo-Christian tradition; for whatever basis this or that individual person might have for endorsing these values, it is not at all clear that they can be maintained at the societal and global levels in the absence of that tradition.

After tracing various questions, Feser points to Europe as an indicator of what happens when a culture denies absolute principles and attempts to ground human rights in a fully secularized worldview. He describes the European condition and ends with a warning:

And then there is the apparent obsession with legalizing and even celebrating all manner of vices—such as pornography and drugs—to a far greater extent than has occurred in the United States; the collapse of marriage and the traditional family in many European countries, along with an alarmingly low birthrate; and the vigorous promotion of euthanasia. We're left with a continent that appears to see no greater end in life than to eat and drink well as far as possible at others' expense, to work little, and to copulate frequently

without the bother of marriage or children; to idle away the remaining hours with various entertainments and illicit pleasures; and, when these distractions start to bore, to end this pointless existence as painlessly as possible with a quick injection at the hands of a government physician.

If this is a caricature, it is hardly a groundless one. And from the traditional Judeo-Christian perspective, the way of life it describes already sounds halfway like a description of hell. It is surely understandable if those still committed to that perspective might wonder if it is a harbinger of worse things yet to come.

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