



Alexander, Laura E. *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction*.
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In *Religion and Human Rights*, Laura E. Alexander introduces the complex relationship between religion and human rights, highlighting their diverse interpretations and points of connection between the two. The book addresses a wide range of social issues that explore the intricate interplay between human rights and religion. The author advocates for viewing human rights as a moral tradition that not only fosters well-being but also serves as a platform for dialogue, where different traditions, including religious ones, can converge (p.13).

The book is an engaging read for scholars across various disciplines, including human rights, ethics, and the philosophy of religion. It addresses a wide range of questions typically associated with human rights, most notably the problem of their infringement, but also the challenge of justifying human rights by appealing to different sources. Traditionally, human rights have been grounded in rationality and the idea of a rational subject. However, their justification can also be strengthened by drawing on sources beyond human reason, including religious traditions. Whether or not one agrees with this perspective, the questions it raises are undoubtedly worth critical philosophical examination. Alexander's book offers just that, enriched with numerous examples and thoughtful analysis.

The book comprises an introduction and eleven chapters. The first chapter provides a brief history of the relationship between religion and human rights, while the second explores major philosophical and religious debates on human rights and their potential as a platform for dialogue. Alexander's interpretation of human rights as a moral tradition calls for an examination of the ethical foundations underpinning this tradition. Chapter 2 outlines these elements, portraying human rights as both a set of moral commitments and a platform for dialogue. The author introduces a metaphor of rivers, where religious and cultural traditions are represented as individual streams flowing in the same direction, with human rights depicted as a larger river that shapes the plain where these streams converge (p.43). Throughout the book, Alexander illustrates how this convergence plays out in relation to specific social issues.

Chapters 3 through 10 explore and discuss contemporary social problems from the perspective of human rights and various religious traditions. Methodologically, the author adopts what she calls a "world religion and topical approach," meaning that rather than focusing on a specific religious tradition, each chapter centers on particular social issues (p.223). As a result, the examples provided are intended to demonstrate

points of intersection between human rights and religion, rather than offering an in-depth analysis of individual religious traditions (p.17).

The book presents a nuanced depiction of the many ways in which human rights and religion intersect. Alexander acknowledges that her focus is primarily on the rights to freedom of conscience and religious expression, but the discussion of these rights also raises broader questions, such as the relationship between majority and minority populations and the tension between individual and collective rights (p.5). In other words, the issues examined in Chapters 3 through 10 operate on the premise that these contexts may highlight tensions between human rights and religious traditions. To illustrate this, I will provide a few examples of the social issues addressed in the book.

Chapter 3 addresses the rights across the lifespan, focusing on both children and the elderly. Alexander illustrates how religious traditions can contribute to the well-being of the elderly by emphasizing care and respect for their wisdom. Religious practices, such as worship and participation in religious communities, provide care and socialization in ways that could serve as a model for human rights (p.67).

Regarding children's rights, Alexander explores potential tensions surrounding the right to education, particularly when parents adhere to specific religious practices. She discusses the argument favoring compulsory primary education over homeschooling based on particular religious viewpoints, expressing concern that homeschooling may not adequately prepare children to engage with people of diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds (p.77) or to function within pluralistic societies (p.78). This perspective assumes that religious education may be inherently undemocratic and at odds with respecting other cultures and groups. While this can indeed be the case, it is necessary to note that the assumption is problematic, as it risks reinforcing existing stereotypes. By pointing at the idea of pluralistic societies in the presented argument, a critical question is raised: how can genuine pluralism and respect for diverse traditions be achieved while upholding both children's right to education and freedom of religion? This question becomes even more critical when considering issues of gender and sexuality. As Alexander rightly notes, gender equality – particularly the idea that men and women are equal in dignity but have different social roles – represents one of "the stickiest points of debate regarding religion and human rights" (p.86). In this chapter, she highlights examples of both religious and non-religious organizations working globally to empower women. However, the efforts of organizations, especially NGOs from the Global North, are frequently criticized for imposing Eurocentric, Western concepts of human rights and gender equality in countries of the Global South, often disregarding the specific experiences, needs, and priorities of women in those regions (p.88-89).

Alexander raises an important question regarding this critique of cultural imposition: who exactly is doing the criticizing? She argues that it is essential to differentiate between criticism voiced by women in the Global South and that expressed by powerful community leaders who may have their own motives for preventing women from exercising their rights (p.91). Many Western NGOs have taken these critiques from women in the Global South into account, continuing their advocacy without imposing rigid viewpoints (p.91). While progress has been made, it

remains crucial to acknowledge the material and discursive power imbalances between the Global North and the Global South, which continue to shape contemporary engagements with women's rights. To underscore the importance of addressing power dynamics, I will now turn to Chapter 6, which focuses on issues of violence, coercion, conflict, and peacebuilding.

Regarding violence and peacebuilding, one of the most debated issues is the justification of humanitarian and military interventions, specifically, whether the protection of human rights can justify state's use of force (p.126). Alexander presents the dilemma that arises when extreme human rights violations occur within a state's borders: should other states, committed to both human rights protection and respect for national sovereignty, intervene? The author concludes that the concept of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) has provided some conceptual clarity on how states and the international community might respond to severe human rights abuses (p.145). In this framework, the dilemma is largely resolved in favor of promoting human rights.

However, according to Alexander, a significant issue remains: the lack of political will to consistently enforce human rights, which, in turn, often leads to violations of sovereignty and interventions in a state's internal affairs under the guise of protecting human rights. This position invites discussion from various perspectives, with one central question still requiring clarification: What understanding of sovereignty and what concept of human rights underlie such justifications for humanitarian intervention?

To sum up, *Human Rights and Religion* offers a wealth of examples addressing pressing social issues, shedding light on the diverse ways human rights and religion intersect. The array of examples presents a complex picture of how these intersections can be understood and why it is essential to examine them. In the introduction, Alexander identifies human dignity as a key point of intersection - "the idea that all people are worthy of respect at a fundamental level." This concept serves as a starting point for a range of discussions on how to perceive and promote human well-being (p.9).

On a normative level, Alexander seems to treat the promotion of human well-being as the core function of human rights. She revisits this idea throughout the book, discussing, for example, the well-being of children and the elderly (p.78), or the well-being of migrants (p.203). In Chapter 8, which deals with religion, health, and human rights, she addresses the withdrawal of life-sustaining care, asserting: "The human rights argument against maintaining life is primarily the rights of the patient not to suffer unnecessarily, in other words, a person's right not to undergo the pain and damage of being bedridden..." (p.179). Thus, Alexander's normative stance on human rights can be interpreted as utilitarian. If this is the case, it could have been more explicitly articulated in the introduction, which would clarify that human rights can be understood differently at a normative level. Such a clarification would enhance the reader's understanding of the diverse perspectives that can be applied to the concept of human rights.

The author acknowledges that human rights can be justified in various ways, including within religious frameworks. She briefly touches on the debate over whether

human rights require a religious foundation, without taking a definitive stance (p.57). While this may be seen as a tenable delimitation, falling beyond the book's scope, it raises a critical issue. If human rights are to be treated as a moral tradition and a platform for dialogue between religious traditions, the question of how human rights are justified seems central to the discussion.

Finally, the metaphor of a river, where religious and cultural traditions converge and mingle, suggests that human rights can serve as a normatively neutral platform for dialogue. Alexander shows that the idea of human rights can bring together diverse actors, both locally and internationally, and unite them around shared goals. However, engaging with religious traditions may offer much more to the critique of human rights, especially when understood as a moral tradition, providing deeper ethical insights that challenge the perceived neutrality of human rights.

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