

HUMAN RIGHTS DISCOURSE IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE AFRICAN ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Abstract: *Some scholars have observed that the protection of human rights in Africa has become increasingly complex and challenging, particularly within religious institutions that continue to shape social and moral life across the continent. This article argues that one of the central tensions facing the African Anglican Church lies in the conflict between hierarchical ecclesiastical authority and modern equality-based human rights frameworks. While Anglican structures traditionally emphasise authority, order, orthodoxy, and obedience, contemporary human rights discourse increasingly prioritises equality, inclusion, freedom, participation, and non-discrimination. Recognising the tension between traditional teachings and modern interpretations of human rights, the study underscores the significant role of the African Anglican Church in advancing this discourse. The article contends that unless the African Anglican Church intentionally engages this tension through theological reflection and institutional dialogue, it risks weakening its moral authority within the broader human rights discourse. Using a literature-based and theologically informed methodology, the article critically examines how Anglican authority structures both enable and hinder the African Anglican Church's prophetic role in defending human dignity. It further explores the opportunities available for the Church to reconcile its theological traditions with contemporary human rights concerns while remaining faithful to Christian doctrine and African realities.*

Key Words: African Anglican Church, Cultural relativism, Ecclesiastical authority, Human rights, *Imago Dei*, Moral universalism.

Introduction

This article explores the broad theme of human rights in Africa, with particular attention to the challenges and opportunities facing the African Anglican Church (hereafter 'the Church') in advancing this discourse. The issue of human rights is profoundly significant to the

Church's mission and ministry in contemporary Africa because of its moral authority, institutional reach, and historical role in social transformation across the continent. On the one hand, governments and international bodies are increasingly advocating for the protection of human rights; on the other hand, violations of these rights continue to increase across Africa. At the same time, the Church itself is deeply entangled in tensions surrounding human rights, particularly where modern equality-based interpretations of rights challenge traditional ecclesiastical authority structures. Consequently, the struggle to promote and safeguard human rights in Africa has become increasingly complex and demanding in the twenty-first century.¹

The author notes the challenge of describing the Church in general terms, as doing so may suggest a uniformity that does not fully reflect its diversity across the continent. Although Anglican churches in Africa share a common heritage rooted in Anglican tradition, they operate within varied cultural, social, political, and historical contexts. Nevertheless, they remain interconnected through theological networks, liturgical traditions, episcopal structures, and global ecclesiastical relationships. These shared characteristics have fostered important common concerns, values, and theological perspectives among Anglican communities across the continent. Such commonalities make it possible to undertake a general analysis of the collective role of the Church in advancing the discourse on human rights in Africa.

This article argues that the major challenge facing the Church in relation to human rights is the conflict between hierarchical authority and equality-based human rights frameworks. Anglicanism in Africa inherited episcopal and clerical systems rooted in hierarchy, obedience, and ecclesiastical order. Bishops, synods, clergy, and church canons often exercise authority in ways that emphasise institutional continuity and doctrinal conformity. By contrast, modern human rights discourse increasingly emphasises equality, participation, inclusion, freedom of conscience, gender equality, and non-discrimination. These competing frameworks frequently generate tension within ecclesiastical decision-making processes.

¹ Paul Magnarella, "Achieving Human Rights in Africa: The Challenge for the New Millennium," *African Studies Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 17–27.

The article, therefore, examines how hierarchical authority structures within the Church interact with equality-based human rights ideals. It argues that while Anglican authority structures have historically provided institutional stability and moral guidance, they can also hinder the Church's ability fully to embrace principles of equality and inclusion. At the same time, the Church possesses significant theological resources that could help reconcile authority with human dignity if approached through dialogue, theological reflection, and institutional reform.

Situating the Church in Human Rights Discourse in Africa

In placing the Church within the discourse on human rights in Africa, I begin with a quotation from Frederick M. Shepherd, who observes:

The concept of human rights precedes the rise of Christianity and has a diverse intellectual heritage that reaches well beyond Christianity. Yet Christians have had a tremendous impact on both the theory and practice of human rights.²

Christianity was introduced to Africa during the Apostolic Age and initially spread rapidly. However, by the seventh century, Arab invasions from the Middle East disrupted its growth in certain regions. During the Middle Ages, Portuguese and French missionaries sought to establish Christianity along Africa's West and East coasts.³ While their efforts bore spiritual fruit, they were undermined by economic motives, particularly the transatlantic slave trade. This trade grossly violated human rights, depriving Africans of God-given dignity and freedom. The Bible affirms the inherent value of every human being, declaring that in Christ, distinctions should not lead to oppression: 'There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female' (Gal. 3:28). Slavery contradicted the justice and dignity that Christianity upholds.

From the late eighteenth century onwards, a new spiritual awakening in Europe and North America inspired the establishment of Anglican

² Frederick M. Shepherd, "Introduction: The Political and Theological Evolution of Christianity and Human Rights," in *Christianity and Human Rights: Christians and the Struggle for Global Justice*, ed. Frederick M. Shepherd (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), ix.

³ For a more detailed discuss on this issue, see Elizabeth Isichei, *A History of African Societies to 1870* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 260-290, 314-343.

missionary societies such as the Church Missionary Society and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. Their aim was to spread the gospel and what they understood as ‘civilisation’ to other parts of the world, including Africa. In practice, Anglican missionaries often associated the gospel with Western culture, presenting both together under the label of ‘Christianity’. They introduced Christianity alongside Western ecclesiastical systems that emphasised hierarchy, clerical authority, and centralised governance. Bishops occupied positions of considerable authority, while African converts were often expected to submit to missionary leadership structures.

Although Anglican missionary activity contributed significantly to the growth of Christianity and education in Africa, its approach was frequently shaped by colonial assumptions and attitudes of cultural superiority. European Anglicans generally regarded their own civilisation, traditions, and ecclesiastical structures as the highest standard to which Africans should aspire in order to become ‘civilised’ and faithful Christians. As a result, conversion within the Anglican Church was often understood not only as acceptance of Jesus Christ, but also as the adoption of Western cultural norms and systems of church governance. Accordingly, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed a profound critique and marginalisation of African cultural practices by both colonial administrators and Anglican missionaries. Consequently, African converts often concluded that their own culture was inferior to Western culture. As Manas Buthelezi says:

The naked truth is that the African lives at the fringe of life. He has been a victim of selective giving and withholding. He has not been allowed to realize the potential of his humanity. In other words, he became alienated from that wholeness of life which in his religious tradition helped him not to live as a split personality.⁴

For most missionaries, to be a Christian meant embracing European civilisation by abandoning the African way of life, which was often described as primitive. In the process, African converts became rootless.

⁴ Manas Buthelezi, “The Theological Meaning of True Humanity,” in *Black Theology: The South African Voice*, ed. Basil Moore (London: C. Hurst & Co., 1973), 102.

The cultural conquest also permeated the intellectual sphere. Africans were widely assumed to be intellectually inferior to Europeans. After the humiliation of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther near the end of his episcopate, the Church Missionary Society deemed it inadvisable to appoint another African diocesan bishop until sixty years after his death. Crowther's humiliation and the reluctance of missionary societies to appoint African bishops thereafter demonstrated the racial hierarchy embedded within Anglican ecclesiastical systems.

Derogatory terms such as 'native' for anything indigenous, 'dialects' for African languages, and 'paganism' for African religious practices were common. In the words of Adrian Hastings, "the early European missionaries thought that it was better for Christianity to have a new social order, a new economy and a new culture to replace the traditional one."⁵ In 1873 Bishop James Johnson of Nigeria wrote:

In the work of elevating Africans, foreign teachers have always proceeded with their work on the assumption that the negro or the African is in every one of his normal susceptibilities an inferior race and that it is useful in everything to give him a foreign model to copy; no account has been made of our peculiarities; our languages enriched with traditions of centuries, our parables, many of them the quintessence of family and national histories, our modes of thought, influenced more or less by local circumstances.⁶

In accepting the cultural conquest promoted by missionaries, Africans developed a sense of inferiority. This may help to explain why many today are more proficient in English or French than in indigenous languages, and why foreign names became common at baptism. Missionaries failed to respect African cultural diversity, leading many elites to view Christianity as aligned with colonial structures that violated Africans' human rights. Referring to the African elite Aylward Shorter states: "They, therefore, denounce Western Christianity or White Christ because they see this as tied up with the colonialism and neocolonialism that have created ghastly realities of hunger, unemployment, repression, racism and violence in the third world."⁷

⁵ Adrian Hastings, *Church and Mission in Modern Africa* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), 37.

⁶ Hastings, *Church and Mission*, 39.

⁷ Chukwudum Okolo, "Christ Is Black," in *African Christian Spirituality*, ed. Aylward Shorter (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980), 71.

However, it is important to note that Christianity could not have been introduced to Africa in a cultural vacuum, as it would have been meaningless without a cultural framework. Even Christ used familiar concepts and symbols in his teachings. Likewise, Christianity in Africa required a ‘cultural dress’ to be understood and remain relevant. Without the efforts and sacrifices of early missionaries, Christianity would not have been established in Africa; it would be a disservice to the Church not to appreciate these evangelising pioneers. As Paul writes, “...how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news” (Rom. 10:15). Missionaries also improved Africans’ basic living conditions, for without secure livelihoods, the protection of human rights would be meaningless. Yet Africans must acknowledge the missionaries’ failure to consider African contexts when transmitting the gospel.

Scripture affirms that the gospel embraces all cultures without erasing identity (Gal. 3:28). Promoting one’s culture is vital, for God is glorified through the diversity of nations and tongues (Rev. 7:9). Secondly, the complete foreignness of the African Christian Church, introduced by missionaries, must be addressed for it to become a dynamic and truly African expression of life and faith. This aligns with Paul’s principle of becoming “all things to all people, so that by all possible means I might save some” (1 Cor. 9:22). A truly African Church must embody the gospel authentically within its cultural context while remaining faithful to Christ. Only then will it flourish as a genuine expression of faith in Africa.

The missionary inheritance, as discussed above, shaped the Church’s understanding of authority. Ecclesiastical leadership became associated with order, discipline, orthodoxy, and institutional control. While these structures contributed to organisational stability, they also cultivated cultures of obedience that sometimes discouraged open critique, dissent, and participatory decision-making. Theologically, church authority was often justified through appeals to apostolic succession, episcopal oversight, and divine order. Consequently, many Anglican institutions developed governance models in which power remained concentrated within clerical and episcopal leadership rather than being broadly distributed among all believers.

The Concept of Human Rights in Africa

The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy defines human rights as “norms that aspire to protect all people everywhere from severe political, legal, and social abuse.”⁸ They are the basic rights and freedoms that are granted to a human being upon his or her birth. According to Stephen P. Marks, human rights “constitute a set of norms governing the treatment of individuals and groups by states and non-state actors on the basis of ethical principles regarding what society considers fundamental to a decent life.”⁹

George Newlands describes human rights as:

Human ability to enjoy certain basic capacities which are constitutive of human living – the ability to enjoy, survive and to enjoy reasonable health and freedom of action, to express one’s views without hindrance, to associate with other people without arbitrary constraints and without fear of torture or detention.¹⁰

In its definition of human rights, the United Nations states: “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Human rights, therefore, are a set of moral principles that establish standards of human behaviour aimed at ensuring equality and fairness. While they may sometimes be restricted, they can never be taken away from a human being. Human rights are distinct from political rights or rights derived from religious traditions. The latter are tied to citizenship or specific religious convictions, whereas the former are universal and not dependent on such affiliations.

Human rights possess several defining characteristics, the most significant of which are the following:

Human rights are universal. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) affirms that human rights are inherent to every individual by virtue of being human and apply equally to all, regardless of

⁸ James Nickel and Adam Etinson, “Human Rights,” *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, rev. (Stanford University: Metaphysics Research Lab, 2004), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/rights-human/>

⁹ Stephen P. Marks, *Human Rights: A Brief Introduction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard School of Public Health, 2017), 2, <https://content.sph.harvard.edu/wwwhsph/sites/134/2017/07/Human-Rights-A-brief-intro-2017.pdf>

¹⁰ George Newlands, *Christ and Human Rights: The Transformative Engagement* (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2006), 4.

origin, status, or residence. For example, African's rights are no different from a European's. All human rights are the same and enforceable across borders. How these rights are observed, therefore, concerns the international community. It is important to note that the notion of the universality of rights has always been challenged by proponents of cultural relativism. They raise the question of whether rights can be delivered to rights-holders in a universally similar form. They argue that "while human rights are universal, an inflexible view of culture and justice may lead to resistance and noncompliance that can ultimately be detrimental to the human rights system as a whole."¹¹

Human rights are inherent. What makes human rights inherent is that they are not granted by any person or authority. An individual does not need to qualify; every person is entitled to them simply by virtue of being human. This distinguishes them from constitutional rights, which are conferred by a state's constitution. Inherent human rights provide a moral and legal foundation for advocating and protecting the dignity and well-being of individuals worldwide. Nevertheless, the concept of being 'human' has been contested by scholars who extend rights to the unborn, arguing that rights should not be limited only to those already born. For instance, Francis J. Beckwith argues:

When I say that the unborn entity is a full-fledged member of the human community (or fully human for short) I mean to say that she is just as much a bearer of rights as any human being whose rights-bearing status is uncontroversial, for example, her mother, you, or me. That is, the unborn entity is entitled to all the rights to which free and equal persons are entitled by virtue of being free and equal persons.¹²

Human rights are indivisible. The concept of the indivisibility of human rights underscores that all human rights are interconnected and interdependent. Unlike legal rights, which may be exercised independently, human rights are indivisible because they cannot be separated or selectively applied. They cannot be denied even when other

¹¹ Yuval Shany, "The Universality of Human Rights: Pragmatism Meets Idealism," Lecture at the Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights (July 18, 2018), <https://www.jbi-humanrights.org/>

¹² Francis J. Beckwith, *Defending Life: A Moral and Legal Case Against Abortion Choice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xii.

rights are already enjoyed. Consequently, all human rights share equal status and cannot be arranged hierarchically. The realisation of one category often depends on the fulfilment of others, and neglect of any set can undermine the enjoyment of the entire spectrum of human rights.¹³

Human rights are imprescriptible. Human rights are imprescriptible because they are not subject to limitation or expiration over time. An individual does not lose these rights even if he or she fails to exercise them. This means that human rights are enduring and timeless, with their validity and applicability persisting without any time limit. This concept is grounded in the belief that human rights are inherent to all human beings and cannot be diminished by the passage of time or changes in circumstance. They cannot be surrendered, transferred, or renounced under any condition.

Human rights are inalienable. Human rights are inalienable because they constitute a non-negotiable aspect of human existence. They are considered an essential part of a person's humanity, possessed simply by virtue of being human, regardless of nationality, race, gender, religion, or social status. Even if an individual expresses a willingness to relinquish certain rights, the principle of inalienability holds that such agreements are invalid when made under circumstances that compromise genuine consent.

Human rights are dynamic. The dynamic nature of human rights acknowledges that our understanding of these rights can expand, new rights may emerge, and interpretations may evolve as societies develop and encounter new circumstances. As societies advance, awareness of different aspects of human well-being grows. Emerging religious, social, economic, and cultural challenges can lead to the recognition and formulation of rights designed to address these issues.

In Africa, the concept of human rights is informed by two main theories: moral universalism and cultural relativism. Advocates of moral universalism, such as Émile Durkheim and George Murdock, argue that human rights are inherent to every individual in all circumstances, and that all human beings are entitled to certain rights simply by virtue

¹³ United Nations Population Fund, "Human Rights Principles," 2005, <https://www.un-fpa.org/resources/human-rights-principles>

of being human. Universal rights are equally held by all people worldwide. As the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states, “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.” This declaration conveys two points: first, every individual possesses human rights; and second, no action is required to earn these rights, being human is sufficient.

The moral universalist theory seeks to ensure that the state and society respect and protect the dignity of the individual. In turn, individuals are expected to assert these rights from both the state and society. At the same time, they bear personal responsibility for upholding and affirming human rights. Moral universalist theory has been mostly propagated by individualist cultures especially in Europe and North America which “emphasize self-direction, autonomy, self-expression, along with self-fulfilment, personal achievement, and personal rights and liberties.”¹⁴ In their efforts to universalize norms, Europe and North America have often disregarded those of other societies, particularly in Africa. Many societies outside these regions view moral universalist theory as a deliberate attempt to undermine cultural diversity and homogenize the world according to Western standards.¹⁵

The question is: to what extent are human rights truly universal in terms of the shared norms of human societies? The cultural relativist theory maintains that human rights are dependent on specific socio-cultural contexts.¹⁶ It says that “human rights are based on values that are determined culturally and vary from one society to another, rather than being universal.”¹⁷ What is considered to be right differs from one culture to another throughout the world. Since what is right is relative, no culture should impose its own ideas on another culture.¹⁸ At

¹⁴ Igor Grossmann and Henri C. Santos, “Individualistic Culture,” in *Encyclopaedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, ed. Virgil Zeigler-Hill and Todd K. Shackelford (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2016), 2238.

¹⁵ Jan Cieciuch and Shalom H. Schwartz, “Values,” in *Encyclopaedia of Personality and Individual Differences*, ed. Virgil Zeigler-Hill and Todd K. Shackelford (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 1–5.

¹⁶ Adamantia Pollis and Peter Schwab, eds., *Human Rights: Cultural and Ideological Perspectives* (New York: Praeger, 1979), 115–144.

¹⁷ Marks, *Human Rights*, 11.

¹⁸ In this article, the term culture is used in a broad sense to include political, religious as well as institutional structures.

the heart of cultural relativist theory lie particularity and communitarianism. According to this view, individuals are expected to pay close attention to their circumstances and see themselves as members of a community that upholds distinct moral norms. Cultural relativists argue that human rights are a Western construct, conflicting with the values of non-Western societies, especially African societies, which emphasise social harmony and collective well-being. They often accuse Christianity of promoting a moral universalist stance that undermines cultural diversity in pursuit of a homogenised world.

Scholars such as Charles Beitz,¹⁹ Jack Donnelly and Martha Nussbaum²⁰ contend that human rights are a moral good that all people should embrace, regardless of the diverse cultural interpretations of these rights. For instance, Donnelly argues that resisting human rights on the grounds of cultural relativism assumes that morality is merely an extension of culture.²¹ The World Conference on Human Rights that met in Vienna in 1993 guided on balancing universal and cultural claims of human rights as follows:

All human rights are universal, indivisible and interdependent and interrelated. The international community must treat human rights globally in a fair and equal manner, on the same footing, and with the same emphasis. While the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds must be borne in mind, it is the duty of States, regardless of their political, economic and cultural systems, to promote and protect all human rights and fundamental freedoms.²²

Situating the African Anglican Church in the Global Context

The main focus of this article, in the context of advancing the discourse on human rights, is the modern Church, which was introduced

¹⁹ Charles Beitz, "Human Rights as Common Concern," *American Political Science Review* 95, no. 2 (June 2001): 269–281.

²⁰ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Capabilities and Human Rights," *Fordham Law Review* 66, no. 2 (1997): 273–300.

²¹ Jack Donnelly, "The Relative Universality of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (2007): 281–306; Jack Donnelly, "The Relative Universality of Human Rights," *Human Rights Quarterly* 29 (2007): 281–306.

²² United Nations, *World Conference on Human Rights: The Vienna Declaration and Programme of Action*, June 1993, para. 5, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/resources/educators/human-rights-education-training/23-the-vienna-declaration-and-programme-of-action>

to Africa between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries through Anglican missionary societies. As Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis assert, the resilience of Christianity in developing countries, including those in Africa, has been one of the greatest surprises of recent decades.²³ According to Christopher Byaruhanga, “Christianity’s explosive growth in Africa is part of a startling reversal in world history. The majority of Christians in the world now live in the global South, with Africa being one of the fastest growing Christian continents in the world.”²⁴ Referring to this same phenomenon, John Witte Jr. observes that “the modern human rights revolution has helped to catalyse a great awakening of religion around the globe,”²⁵ including Christianity.

Recent projections by the Pew Research Centre confirm that Africa now has the largest Christian population in the world. The continent has become a beacon because of the sheer number of Christians living there. Several scholars argue that Christianity is no longer a predominantly Western religion, having taken deep root in Africa; consequently, the African church can no longer be defined merely by its baptised members. This is what Kwame Bediako captures in the title of his book as “the renewal of a non-Western religion.”²⁶ Many scholars further contend that Africa is poised to become one of the spiritual centres of global Christianity, and that Christians worldwide will increasingly recognise themselves as part of the unfolding story of African Christianity.

The shift in the centre of gravity of Christianity to the Global South, and particularly to Africa, has coincided with a rise in human rights abuses across many African nations. In this context, the Church carries a unique responsibility to serve humanity both globally and, especially, within Africa, where the rights of many people continue to

²³ Gerrie ter Haar and Stephen Ellis, “The Role of Religion in Development: Towards a New Relationship Between the European Union and Africa,” *European Journal of Development Research* 18, no. 3 (2006): 351–367.

²⁴ Christopher Byaruhanga, “An Overview of African Christian Research,” paper delivered at the Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life (Stellenbosch University, South Africa, 2012).

²⁵ John Witte Jr., “A Dickensian Era of Religious Rights,” in *Christianity and Human Rights: Christians and the Struggle for Global Justice*, ed. Frederick M. Shepherd (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), 21.

²⁶ Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

be violated. Any effort to advance the discourse on human rights in Africa today must therefore draw upon insights from the diverse traditions, teachings, and social witness of the Church and the wider Christian tradition.

In the ongoing discourse on human rights, the Church must grapple with critical questions: what is its responsibility in promoting and defending human rights, and how should Anglicans engage within their local and national contexts? This article argues that the Church, as one of the major contemporary centres of global Christianity and a new homeland for Christ, bears a particular responsibility for upholding and advancing human rights across the African continent.

Human Rights from an African Anglican Theological Perspective

Modern human rights discourse rests on the principle that all human beings possess equal dignity and equal rights simply by virtue of their humanity. Consequently, human rights frameworks challenge systems that institutionalise exclusion, domination, and discrimination. As formal organisations, the Church has a mission and purpose in the world and is therefore called to shape the cultural contexts in which human rights violations occur. Although human rights are not exclusive to the Christian tradition, they are inseparably connected to the mission of the African Anglican Church. Defending human rights forms an integral part of the Church's gospel mission because it reveals the compassionate face of God in a suffering world.

The responsibility is grounded in the biblical teaching that God created humanity in his own image (Gen. 1:26–27). One pressing question within contemporary human rights discourse is: “How should we live in the world today?” A response to this question may be found in Gen. 1:26, where God declares, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” This foundational statement affirms that every human being bears the *imago Dei* and is therefore entitled to dignity and respect. The Christian faith maintains that the divine image confers intrinsic worth upon all people, regardless of their social, cultural, or economic status.

Taken together, the biblical passages demonstrate that the Christian understanding of human rights is deeply rooted in Scripture. Because all human beings bear the image of God, every individual possesses

inherent dignity and worth. This theological insight calls believers to promote justice, defend the vulnerable, and uphold the rights of all people as an expression of God's love and the divine value bestowed upon humanity. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, referring to discrimination during the apartheid and post-apartheid regime said:

Human life (as all life) is a gift from the gracious and ever-generous Creator of all. It is therefore inviolable. We must therefore have a deep reverence for the sanctity of human life. That is why homicide is universally condemned . . . we should not just respect such a person but that we should have a deep reverence for that person.²⁷

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* particularly emphasises the dignity and honour granted to humanity. Being created in God's image entails inherent worth and absolute value. Consequently, all human beings possess human rights by virtue of their shared humanity. Accordingly, the Christian understanding of human rights is ultimately grounded in the value that God has conferred upon human beings through Christ.

In many African countries, modern missionaries played a significant role in advancing the discourse on human rights.²⁸ During the colonial period, missionaries often opposed exploitative colonial policies that dehumanised and oppressed Africans. In standing against injustice, they echoed the prophetic tradition of Scripture, which calls God's people to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves" (Pro. 31:8–9) and to "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8). Today, many African church leaders continue to play an important advocacy role for the poor and marginalised.

Although the idea of rights has received considerable attention, it is the concept of duties that is explicitly stated and encouraged within the religious context. For instance, the Ten Commandments, which prescribe a series of duties each person owes to others, suggest that all persons are bearers of basic and inalienable human rights, provided

²⁷ Desmond M. Tutu, "The First Word: To Be Human Is to Be Free," in *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 2.

²⁸ Bonny Ibhawoh, *Imperialism and Human Rights: Colonial Discourses of Rights and Liberties in African History* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007). The author traces how colonial encounters, including missionary activity, were part of the way human rights ideas were introduced, contested, and transformed in Africa.

they fulfil a set of minimum human duties. In this context, human rights appear as the reciprocals of divinely ordained moral duties.

To speak of human rights and responsibilities, means to speak not only of the rights and responsibilities of individuals but also those of the community. Tutu says, “in the face of injustice it is to disobey God not to stand up in opposition to that injustice and that oppression.”²⁹ If Christians are to remain the salt of the earth (Matt. 5:13) and the light of the world (Matt. 5:14–16), they must not “remain indifferent in the face of the many grave and often systematic violations of human rights.”³⁰ Therefore, indifference in the face of oppression contradicts the very calling of the church as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), which is commissioned to proclaim liberty to the captives and to set the oppressed free (Luke 4:18).

The Church in Africa views the Bible as a powerful resource for promoting and upholding human rights, placing it in a strong position to defend these rights. Several factors contribute to the Church’s effectiveness in advocating for human rights. These include the authority exercised by Church hierarchies and leaders, the influence of the Church’s institutional structures, the spirit of ecumenism, the Church’s capacity to document and publish evidence of human rights abuses accurately, and its ability to mobilise the global church through international networks.

In some instances, however, the Church has not been fully successful in advocating for the observance of human rights. Within equality-based human rights discourse, core principles such as participation, freedom of conscience, gender equality, inclusion, accountability, and non-discrimination are central. These principles increasingly shape constitutional law, civil society activism, education, and public morality across Africa. In this respect, the Church has fallen short in certain contexts. Several factors have contributed to this shortcoming, the most significant being the differing anthropological assumptions underlying human rights discourse, which presupposes that human beings are not merely isolated individuals, but social beings who exist

²⁹ Tutu, “The First Word,” 3.

³⁰ Paul VI, “Message to the UN on the 25th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” *L’Osservatore Romano* 51 (20 December 1973): 3.

in relationship and community. Secondly, human rights discourse emphasises the equal moral status of all persons, whereas ecclesiastical hierarchy often operates through differentiated authority and submission. While human rights frameworks stress gender equality and equal participation, some Anglican traditions continue to restrict women's ordination or limit their leadership roles. Defenders of these restrictions appeal to Scripture, tradition, and ecclesiastical order, whereas critics argue that such exclusions contradict the Christian affirmation of equal human dignity.

Rights, therefore, provide a framework for understanding how people relate to one another. For instance, the Church calls on believers to love their neighbours, as Christ commanded: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:39; Mark 12:31). This love is to be expressed not only in words but also in action, for Scripture declares, "Let us not love in word or talk but indeed and in truth" (1 John 3:18). While the Church encourages this love, it does not present it as a right owed by the neighbour; rather, love is to be given freely and unconditionally. Within Christianity, and particularly within the Church, there is a strong emphasis on giving, service, and self-sacrificial love rather than on the assertion or demand of rights.

Despite this foundation, several factors have historically limited the effectiveness of the Church in advocating for human rights. Internal power struggles and bitter divisions have often weakened its position. In some cases, the State has exploited these divisions to maintain control, while fear of reprisals under hostile or totalitarian regimes has constrained ecclesial action. The plurality of theological doctrines within Christianity, while enriching in its diversity, has also hindered the development of a unified theological framework to guide collective engagement on human rights. Differing doctrinal interpretations can result in fragmented approaches, weakened consensus, and a diminished capacity for the Church to speak with a single prophetic voice.

In many African Anglican contexts, decision-making power remains concentrated within clerical hierarchies. Lay voices, women, young people, and marginalised groups may possess limited influence within ecclesiastical structures despite broader societal movements towards democratisation and equality. Furthermore, corruption within church

structures, at times influenced by the State, and occasional state assertions of hostility towards the Church, including claims to be the sole guarantor of human rights, have further complicated the African Anglican Church's advocacy efforts.

The Church has often fused religious belief systems with other identities, such as tribal or cultural affiliations. Tensions arise because hierarchical ecclesial structures do not always align easily with equality-based understandings of authority and participation. This conflict becomes especially evident in debates concerning women's ordination, gender roles, sexuality, ecclesiastical accountability, and freedom of theological expression. When this happens, as James E. Waller says:

The church loses its critical role as a prophetic voice of the voiceless and becomes, instead, married to other social identities that privilege it among power holders and mobilize the church to preserve, rather than challenge, the status quo.³¹

Human rights advocates often interpret exclusionary church practices as violations of equality and non-discrimination. Church leaders, however, frequently defend such practices as necessary expressions of biblical authority and doctrinal faithfulness.

At times, the affirmation of human rights within the Church has been hindered by ecclesiastical and institutional structures that lack a strong culture of human rights. Many Anglicans perceive human rights discourse as a problematic product of Enlightenment liberalism, which emphasised reason over revelation, nature over Scripture, the individual over the community, and the sovereignty of humanity over the absolute sovereignty of God. For some within the Church, the expansion of the modern human rights movement appears akin to a 'secular religion,' one that threatens to displace the Christian faith, especially at a time when Christian beliefs and practices are increasingly being challenged in parts of the Global North. They also say that "the concept of human rights is a tool of Western imperialism used to disguise political, economic and military ambitions of Western nations

³¹ James E. Waller, "Deliver Us from Evil: Genocide and the Christian World," in *Christianity and Human Rights: Christians and the Struggle for Global Justice*, ed. Frederick M. Shepherd (New York: Lexington Books, 2009), 6.

against those in the developing world.”³² Some of them also perceive human rights as instruments of neo-colonialism, used by the West to impose its values on other parts of the world.³³

The Church faces significant challenges in reconciling its traditional teachings with modern interpretations of human rights, which at times appear to challenge established ecclesiastical structures. While contemporary human rights discourse emphasises liberty, equality, participation, and individual autonomy, many Anglican traditions continue to emphasise authority, hierarchy, and doctrinal continuity. Certain church teachings and practices, such as restrictions on women’s ordination or exclusive claims regarding salvation, may therefore come into tension with contemporary understandings of equality and non-discrimination. Human rights frameworks often promote pluralism and diversity, whereas the Church has historically emphasised orthodoxy and theological uniformity. This tension complicates the African Anglican Church’s efforts to uphold its theological convictions while simultaneously advocating for human rights principles, and it may help explain why some Christian theologians remain hesitant to employ the language of rights without qualification.

Within the Church, human rights are often understood differently from the way they are interpreted in legal and secular contexts. Greater emphasis is frequently placed on human duties and responsibilities rather than on individual rights, thereby challenging the assumption that human rights are universally understood and uniformly embraced across all religious traditions. For example, responsible participation in the common good, now enshrined as a basic right in many African national constitutions, is also interpreted by the Church as a moral and social duty. Scripture emphasises that human beings are called to love and serve one another: “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). Likewise, protecting the vulnerable, including orphans, widows, and strangers, is presented as a direct expression of fulfilling human responsibilities before God (Deut. 10:18–19). Within this framework, human rights and human duties are understood as two sides of the same coin: human rights provide a framework through

³² Marks, *Human Rights*, 12.

³³ Samuel Moyn, *Not Enough: Human Rights in an Unequal World* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018).

which human responsibilities before God may be fulfilled, ensuring that justice, human dignity, and care for the marginalised are upheld as both moral and spiritual obligations.

Opportunities for the African Anglican Church

Despite the tensions outlined above, the African Anglican Church possesses significant opportunities to contribute meaningfully to human rights discourse in Africa. The first opportunity lies in the Church's significant moral credibility within African societies, where trust in ecclesiastical leadership often exceeds trust in political institutions. This generates what may be described as public theological capital, namely, the Church's capacity to shape ethical discourse beyond its internal ecclesial boundaries.

However, this opportunity is double-edged. While it enables the Church to advocate for justice, peace, and human dignity, it also places it under scrutiny regarding whether its internal practices align with its public moral claims. In other words, credibility in human rights discourse depends on consistency between proclamation and practice. If internal governance remains overly hierarchical in ways that marginalise participation, the Church's external advocacy risks being weakened by internal contradiction.

Second, there is the Anglican theological tradition as a resource for human rights. The second opportunity lies in Anglican theological and ecclesiological resources, particularly the classical triad of Scripture, tradition, and reason, and its historically moderated approach to authority and order. This tradition offers a framework that is neither rigidly authoritarian nor purely egalitarian, but rather dialogical and interpretive.

Within this framework, the doctrine of the *imago Dei* provides a strong theological foundation for equality and inherent human dignity. At the same time, Anglican ecclesiology affirms structured authority for the sake of order and unity. The opportunity, therefore, is not the abandonment of hierarchy, but its reconfiguration into accountable, participatory, and service-oriented authority.

Third, there is the reconstruction of ecclesial authority. In this article, I have identified a key theological tension; however, the deeper analytical opportunity lies in reconstructing authority rather than rejecting it. The Church can develop models of leadership that are (a) participatory, allowing greater lay involvement in decision-making; (b) accountable, ensuring that episcopal and clerical authority is subject to transparent governance; (c) pastorally grounded, where authority is exercised as service rather than domination; and (d) theologically coherent, rooted in Anglican sacramental and communal ecclesiology. In this sense, authority becomes relational rather than strictly hierarchical.

Fourth, there is a missional opportunity in human rights discourse. The African Anglican Church has the opportunity to position human rights not as an external liberal import, but as a theological expression of Christian anthropology and mission. This reframing is particularly important in African contexts where human rights discourse is sometimes viewed with suspicion.

By grounding human rights in Christian doctrine, especially dignity, justice, and reconciliation, the Church can contribute to a contextual African Anglican theology of human rights that is both culturally resonant and globally engaged.

Conclusion

Moving forward, it is important to acknowledge that the African Anglican Church stands at a critical crossroads within contemporary human rights discourse. On the one hand, it inherits hierarchical ecclesiastical structures rooted in authority, tradition, and doctrinal order. On the other hand, it operates within societies that are increasingly shaped by equality-based understandings of human rights, which emphasise participation, inclusion, freedom, and non-discrimination.

This article has argued that the central tension confronting the African Anglican Church lies in the conflict between hierarchical authority structures and equality-based human rights frameworks. While ecclesiastical hierarchy has historically contributed to institutional stability and theological continuity, it has, in some instances, hindered the Church's ability to embody the equality and dignity affirmed both in

Scripture and in contemporary human rights discourse. For this tension not to become destructive, it is imperative that the Church actively embraces dialogue and engages in open, reflective discussions on human rights within its institutions and communities. Such engagement will not only help address internal tensions surrounding certain doctrines and practices, but will also foster an environment that values inclusivity, compassion, and respect for all people, regardless of their social, cultural, or economic backgrounds.

Although reconciling traditional theological teachings with contemporary interpretations of human rights presents undeniable challenges, the African Anglican Church is uniquely positioned to help bridge this divide. Its moral authority, historical influence, and extensive social networks provide it with a powerful platform from which to advocate for justice, human dignity, and ethical responsibility within society. By promoting thoughtful theological and social discourse, the Church can encourage its members to understand human rights not as external impositions, but as expressions of God given moral obligations towards others. Through sustained dialogue, advocacy, and education, the African Anglican Church can play a transformative role in advancing a more just, equitable, and humane society, one in which the rights and dignity of every person are recognised, protected, and upheld as part of the shared moral and spiritual responsibility entrusted to humanity.

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