

**The Power of Religion and Human Rights:
Keynote Speech at the 2017 Bernstein Symposium at Yale University**

By Larry Cox

The Kairos Center's mission is "to strengthen and expand transformative movements for social change that can draw on the power of religions and human rights." But what is the power of religions and human rights, and what is their relationship? The following essay, the keynote address given by Larry Cox, Kairos co-director, to this year's Bernstein Symposium on Religion and Human Rights at Yale University (March 23, 2017), goes a long way toward answering this question.

I became an activist because I grew up in circumstances that caused people in my family to suffer unnecessarily and unjustly. I decided early on to spend my life trying to understand the *why* of such injustice and how to fight to end it. I have read, studied, and benefited from the works of scholars, but most of what I have learned about both religion and human rights has come, and continues to come, from that fight. When I was an isolated and powerless adolescent, it was religion, especially the religion exemplified and taught by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., that gave me the sense that ending injustice was possible and that I was called by something larger than myself to find a way to help. It was that vision of Christianity coupled with an experience of revolutionary politics I had while in Paris in 1968 that led me to try, to use Dr. King's words, to move "from reform to revolution," or at least to left-wing politics. And, almost exactly as Samuel Moyn describes in his book *The Last Utopia*, when revolutionary politics collapsed in

the 1970s I was saved from political paralysis if not despair by the discovery of Amnesty International and the explosion of human rights.

This journey from religion to revolutionary politics to human rights is hardly unique to me. It was made in different ways by many. What it teaches is why the topic of this symposium matters so much. It matters because both for individuals and for movements, *religions and human rights have been and continue to be sources of great moral and social power in the fight for a more just and humane world*. When religion and human rights are joined together, as they were for example in the civil rights movement and, although often ignored if not forgotten, as they were in the early days of the human rights movement, this power has been transformational. It has proved capable of saving lives and changing societies.

When religion and human rights separate and the power of each declines, is distorted, or—especially in the case of religion—is discredited by abuse, when their power no longer fuels and sustains social movements, it clears the way for those using other forms of power to begin to roll back hard earned victories for justice, freedom, and equality.

This is, as you know, the moment we are in right now. It is a moment we have been in for a long while, certainly well before November 8, 2016 or January 20, 2017. In my organization we call this a “kairos” moment. *Kairos* is an ancient Greek word that means a time for decisive action. As used in the New Testament it also means a time when old ways are crumbling, when dominant and longstanding institutions, structures and systems are losing their legitimacy, at best no longer seeming capable of solving problems, at worse seen as complicit in them. The most important dimension of a *kairos* moment is that in the midst of this collapse and crisis something new, something tied to the Eternal, struggles to come into existence. My favorite theologian Paul Tillich, who developed the modern use of this term, saw the period between the end of the First

World War and the rise of fascism as such a *kairos* moment. The 1960s were arguably another such moment. As these examples illustrate, there is no guarantee that the “something new” will be triumphant, will not be stillborn, killed or, even worse, will not prove to be demonic.

The jury is still out on the current moment but its *kairos* quality seems manifestly clear. The short-lived but unexpectedly powerful Occupy Wall Street eruption both reflected and contributed to the widespread awareness that we are living at a time when increasingly interconnected global economic and social systems relentlessly and ruthlessly are creating truly obscene levels of riches, privilege and power for a tiny minority of mostly men. At the same time the income most people need to survive has stagnated or dramatically declined for decades. This unprecedented and startling inequality and growing impoverishment represents a serious threat to democracy. For the majority of people, it is destroying the hope that their lives can get better. It is inflicting unnecessary suffering and often death on millions of people. In the case of the United States the official statistics show that nearly half the country—47%—are either low income or below the poverty line. Just a few weeks ago a study came out that 43% of US children live in families that struggle to feed, clothe and house them.

There are many reasons for the election of a Donald Trump, and the rise of his counterparts around the world, but it is this widespread pain that made it possible. That pain made unattractive any candidate that appeared to represent politics as usual, and was unable to offer solutions commensurate with the problems people face. As other alternatives were eliminated, it became possible for the most privileged, the most white, and the most patriarchal of men to present himself as an agent of change. Now we are seeing clearly and earlier than usual the nature of that change. It is aimed not at the current system that creates and expands inequality (and made Trump a billionaire). It is aimed instead at taking away protections and driving down those—the

poor, people of color, women and immigrants—who have suffered the most from that system and who are now demonized as the explanation for why it works only for the few.

Institutions that might once have been the source of resistance and renewal—government, the media, the arts, organized religion, the NGOs (including well-heeled human rights ones), and, yes, the most distinguished universities, are instead in their own forms of crisis. They suffer, as public opinion polls reveal, different degrees of long term loss of respect and trust.

None of this has stopped—and for reasons we will discuss, will never stop—people from fighting back. For years there have been repeated outbreaks, struggles and movements, some highly visible and some under the radar but all demonstrating that “something new” is indeed seeking to be born: Occupy, the Dreamers movement, Black Lives Matter, Moral Mondays, the Fight for \$15, the Climate Change movement, Standing Rock and more. Since the inauguration the intensity, frequency and number of people taking to the streets has grown dramatically. But for something truly new to emerge and go beyond simply protesting Donald Trump to significantly changing the conditions that made his rise possible, sources of sustained moral power need to be found, nurtured and deepened.

And that is what gives the question we are discussing of the relationship of religion and human rights such importance. For the question it raises—which is so much more than academic—is not just whether human rights needs religion and whether religion need human rights, but whether coming together they can still supply the kind of transformative power we will all need for the long and critical fight ahead.

Trying to answer that question requires trying to answer others: what gives religion and human rights their power, what blocks that power, and what is needed to unleash it again? The answers to such questions are not identical for religion and for human rights but what is striking

and instructive is how similar they are. For here is what religion and human rights have in common: the source of their power ultimately depends not on their organizations, resources, public status, rituals, or teachings. The power of religion and of human rights depends most on how each of us experience them, both collectively and individually, in the deepest part of our lives.

In the case of religion, and here I can only give you my own understanding drawing primarily from a Christian faith tradition, this is the experience, the sense, of being rooted in an Ultimate Reality that is both deep within each of us—is immanent—and is far greater than any of us—transcendent. As Paul Tillich put it, “religion is the state of being grasped by something unconditional, holy, absolute.” As the legal philosopher and self-proclaimed atheist Ronald Dworkin put it, religion “is the sense that inherent, objective value permeates everything, that the universe and its creatures are awe-inspiring, that human life has purpose and the universe order.”

Religions attempt to capture and express this *unconditional* source of value, purpose and awe through symbols, texts, stories, rituals, doctrines, and forms of organization. These external expressions of religion are, importantly, *not* unconditional. They are human creations very much conditioned by the limits of human understanding. But their power depends on the degree to which they are felt to be rooted in, and pointing toward, something which is ultimate. As the connection to this sacred reality weakens, these external forms of religion lose their power and may even disappear or their power become distorted and destructive. This of course is what we see happening in different degrees in different parts of the world to many forms of organized religion.

This also applies to the moral values, norms and ethical demands taught by religions. These religious moral norms have such great power, again, because they are felt not to be inventions of human beings but expressions of that which transcends us and yet structures our lives,

pushing us toward what we are meant to be, and how we are meant to live. But the perception and understanding of those moral norms—or, if you will, natural laws—is very clearly human. And because it is human it has a history. It is a history of a slowly growing consensus that the highest values are love and compassion for all and especially those who are hurting the most and are denied justice—the poor, the stranger, the socially despised. But it is also a history of continued contestation, of struggles over how these moral norms are to be applied to our lives and society. This contestation is reflected in many sacred texts themselves and in moral battles over such issues as slavery, war, and the treatment of the poor, immigrants, women, and most recently LGBTQ people. These fights take on such added intensity and seriousness because they are not just about the ideas and views of different human beings. They are experienced as fights about what the deepest and transcendent part of our beings requires and demands.

It is precisely this link between divine reality and its human expressions that gives religions such power. The deployment of this moral and religious power has been critical in winning major advances throughout history for human freedom, equality, and rights, from the abolitionist movement to the fights against apartheid, economic exploitation, and dictatorships around the world. This sense of being called and directed by the ultimate moral force expressed in the word God has long driven well-known heroes like Gandhi, Oscar Romero, and Dr. King and countless less celebrated men and women, to risk and sacrifice their lives for the common good.

But, as we are also acutely aware, this sense of being connected to the divine has also driven, and continues to drive, people to sacrifice *other* peoples' lives, to kill and oppress in the name of absolute truth, in the name of God. This is the great danger of religious power. It is the danger of idolatry, the frequent human practice of treating what is human and conditional—

scriptures, doctrines, and religious or even supposedly secular leaders, not as imperfect expressions of what is holy but as the holy itself, as divine and therefore beyond question or challenge, beyond any laws or norms, and superior to other belief systems, which, because they dare to put forward alternative views, must be suppressed or destroyed.

In every religious tradition I am aware of there is a continual struggle, both theological and political, over this danger of idolatry and the misuse of religious power. It is a theological fight because the identification of human constructs and persons with absolute truth does not express but breaks the connection to what is truly holy. Instead of advancing for the common good the moral values at the heart of religious traditions it represents the exploitation of faith to serve destructive ideological and political power. The fight is political because the misuse of religious power threatens everyone, religious or secular.

In seeking to stop this abuse of religious power, people of religious faith play not the only but a particularly critical role. And in their fight human rights is both a major battleground and a major weapon. It is a battleground because when religious bodies commit to a set of universal ethical values expressed in secular language they are accepting and acknowledging that no single faith can impose on others its understanding of the truth but must work with people of different faiths and no religious faith at all to advance values all can affirm. This is dangerous heresy to those who believe there is absolute truth, that they have it, and that it trumps any secular assertion about the rights of all.

Human rights is a key weapon in the religious fight because, as the distinguished scholar of Islam and human rights, Abdullahi An-Naim, has stressed, human rights safeguard the freedom of believers to challenge religious orthodoxy and fight attempts to identify religion with

rights violations. By passing laws based on human rights, the state helps different religious communities, and members of the same community who have different interpretations, live together in shared political space, and learn and grow from their encounter with each other and with secular ideas, all of which is essential for religious vitality and development.

But human rights cannot provide this much needed help to religious communities if their power and legitimacy is diminished because they are seen as the expression of, at best, indifference and, at worst, hostility to the deepest beliefs and concerns of people of religious faith, the people who still make up the vast majority of people of this earth.

To change the perception that the human rights movement is aggressively secular and has no need for religions or interest in them, except when they are complicit in violations, will take more than human rights activists hanging out with religious folk or learning to do religious talk so that congregations can better be mobilized from time to time for human rights campaigns. A serious dialogue, let alone alliance, with religions requires of human rights advocates something more basic and apparently more difficult. Certainly it requires learning the history of how religious thinkers and activists played a critical role in shaping and advancing human rights. But even more it demands understanding *the religious dimensions of the very idea of human rights*. And in fully understanding and building on these dimensions human rights activists can understand, renew, and begin to increase the power of human rights. Because the power of human rights cannot be separated from these religious dimensions.

My own thinking about this power is based not so much on theory and scholarship but on my experience in one of the leading human rights organizations, Amnesty International, in the years when its power grew most dramatically in the 1970s and 1980s. It was clear that the power

that was manifesting itself in a growing human rights movement was not coming from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, from UN conferences, from international law or mechanisms. As Dr. Moyn and others have documented, these government created documents and instruments existed for decades and did not display any power that could change lives or societies.

That governments were not the source of the power of human rights should not be a surprise. For the foundational idea of human rights is that they are *not* the creation of governments. They are not created *at all* but discovered, usually through the fight against their violation. As is often proclaimed but less often seriously examined, human rights are inherent in every human being at birth. All governments can do is formulate, recognize, and respect them. They can respond and add to their power but they cannot create them.

This proclamation that every human being is born with inherent rights shared equally with every other human being is as astonishing as it is radical. It cannot be demonstrated or proven scientifically. It is a statement of faith, but like all faith it has power because it is based on human experience. And this power began to grow the way all faiths grow—with stories—with the stories of people from very different cultures and political contexts sharing in common only the painful experience of having their inherent rights and therefore their human dignity grossly violated. These were also stories of people demanding and fighting for these violations to end. The stories resonated and they spread. They motivated people to take action because they were not stories about the rights of other people—they were the stories of the rights of *all* people, the rights each of us can feel, the rights that governments had foolishly recognized and proclaimed to be universal.

It was critical that these stories were framed by a human experience so basic that it could legitimately appear to be universal, cutting across not only deep divides of geography, culture

and history but of religious doctrines and political ideology. It is the claim of human rights that whatever the many differences human beings have and will always have, there is a common reality and experience that makes it possible to agree and to act on certain fundamental values and ethical norms. This claim was made decades earlier but it is not an accident that it began to be really heard and felt at a time when the awareness of conflicting religious claims was rising and when, as Moyn points out and my own story illustrates, disillusionment with political ideologies making utopian claims was deepening. At that historical moment the idea of fundamental rights that were universal because they were inherent in every single human being was not just powerful. It was liberating.

And then this idea of universal human rights was confirmed in the struggles for them in very different parts of the world. Eventually and not easily these rights came to be enshrined in international law and in constitutions and domestic laws. But in keeping with the foundational idea, those fighting for these rights most often framed their violations not in legal terms—article such and such of treaty such and such—but in moral and frequently religious terms, terms of right and wrong, moral and immoral, terms of what human beings must have to be fully human, and to live in societies that are just and good. And human rights activists, while always including lawyers—God bless them—were more often people of faith, frequently meeting in churches, synagogues, and other places of worship.

I don't want to romanticize the human rights movement as it grew to prominence. I spent too much time in it for that. While the people who we fought for lived all over the world and were culturally and politically diverse, the movement itself was never close to being truly global. It was overwhelmingly Western European and North American. It was built on, reflected and in many ways took advantage of colonial and neocolonial history and current realities. The idea of

human rights did not penetrate deeply into non-Judeo-Christian cultures and with its limited Western emphasis on civil and political rights it hardly seemed relevant to communities around the world struggling with economic deprivation and injustice—which is to say, most communities. Yet it did, perhaps more than any other social movement in history, win amazing victories both for individuals and societies. And in the heady days of the end of the cold war, with numerous dictatorships falling, with a globalization spreading that included world conferences on women, the environment, poverty, racism and human rights itself, and with the dramatic growth of new human rights groups in countries where it was never thought possible, there seemed no reason to believe that the power of the human rights idea and activism would not continue to increase and extend its reach, moving toward genuine and deep universality that might even include being applied to the United States. Building on victories for civil and political rights, some began to believe that a more robust and global human rights movement would at long last address all human rights—including the violations of social and economic rights causing misery for vast numbers of people.

That's not how it worked out. A number of important human rights organizations are certainly alive and well and doing good and important work. But it is difficult to look at the way governments are talking or not talking and more importantly acting or not acting in the face of continuing serious and often massive human rights violations, or to look at our own government now led by a man who campaigned openly for the violation of human rights, for torture and extrajudicial killings, and not conclude that the power of the human rights movement has, for a significant period, been in decline. Indeed, it is not clear that it is still possible to call it a movement.

The reasons for this are undoubtedly myriad and complicated. But one major factor is once again analogous to what happens to religions. Human rights groups slowly but steadily began to confuse the external results of power and influence with the source of that power and influence. As the human rights movement grew and its activism, reports, and criticisms got increased attention, governments, at least the less threatened ones, responded by dramatically increasing the number of international treaties, mechanisms and judicial processes. These promised, and in a few cases delivered, some modest advances but, intentional or not, these government-approved pathways were slow and time consuming and often seemed designed to keep human rights workers diverted from more threatening domestic forms of generating political pressure.

Donors also responded to the march of human rights by giving some of the key organizations financial resources beyond their wildest dreams. This made it possible to begin hiring more and more professionals who got their training not from time spent in grassroots movements and struggles but increasingly from university programs usually set up in law schools. Human rights began to shift from a cause to a career. The discourse on human rights began to shift from a moral one—accessible to all—to a legal one, accessible to a few. It was the totally secular and rational nature of human rights that became increasingly an article of faith. In terms of action, the lobbying of ostensibly friendly governments to put pressure on unfriendly ones began to take precedence over organizing and servicing raggedy but independent volunteer activists who often came from and drew on their faith backgrounds. It was the media and not religious or other mass organizations that were counted on to educate and mobilize the public on human rights.

There is no doubt this professionalization of human rights produced some immediate and important results. But over the longer term, human rights changed from a universal idea that concerned all human beings and was relevant to nearly every serious issue facing them, a moral idea related to and supported by virtually every religious tradition, calling on people of all backgrounds to join a universal fight, into one more specialized legal discipline with its own peculiar language and methodology, not needing activists as much as it needed financial donations to support experts.

Then the momentum began to turn. There were highly visible and extremely painful failures to stop genocide. Friendly governments became less friendly as they started to defend all means necessary, including torture, to defeat the acts of terror that were being exploited to frighten voters. Slowly it became clear that experts, lobbying, and the UN were maybe not enough. The support and understanding of the public for human rights had been, to say the least, overstated, especially human rights defined in ways that made them seem irrelevant to issues most people found the most pressing in their lives, like growing economic pain.

Questions began to be raised about the effectiveness and relevance of human rights work, coming not just from the usual suspects—repressive governments or left-wing critics accusing the human rights idea of being a form of imperialism—but from long term supporters. This included funders. One of the foundations that had played a leading role in financing the human rights movement started removing even those words from any of its programs. A serious debate could take place on whether we are living, in the words of one dramatic book title, in the end-times of human rights.

The end-times of human rights. One more similarity of human rights with religions, whose demise has been predicted for an even longer time. Given that this symposium is about

both religion and human rights, I am happy to offer my very firm view that neither is ending. We haven't been wasting our time. Indeed, if as I have been arguing, both religion and human rights have their origin in the very structure of our being then the only way they can end is if the human race ends (which, granted, these days does not seem impossible). As long as we exist, human beings will remain religious creatures and they will continue to fight for their human rights. But the form this takes for both religion and human rights is certainly changing, as it must. The good news is that some of the most important changes are opening up a possibility for religions to reclaim human rights, for human rights to rediscover their affinity to religion, and for them to come together in the hard and critical fight we now face.

The way human beings express their religious feelings, the organized forms it takes, is always changing, usually in ways that confound the experts. What is conditional, as opposed to what is eternal, always changes as conditions change and this clearly can be seen today on many fronts—the encounter of a supposedly secular or post-Christian Europe with a vibrant and expanding Islam; new forms of Hindu and even Buddhist nationalisms; in the United States, the rise and decline of the religious right now pinning its hopes on, God help them, Donald Trump; and the continuing expansion everywhere of all sorts of Pentecostal formations that put more emphasis on experience than on doctrine, not to mention the growing number of the so-called “spiritual but not religious.” All of this could be the subject of many separate conferences. What is most relevant for this one is the resurgence of something resembling earlier social gospel movements, or what the program for this symposium calls “new forms of religious activism.”

For many people the symbol of this change is none other than Pope Francis with his frequent and powerful calls not just to serve the poor but to join their fight to change the economic and social structures that oppress them and deny their rights and dignity. But this new activism is

found within every faith tradition, among Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists as well as those ubiquitous spiritual but not religious people. What is important about this growing phenomenon is that it aligns so well and opens up the possibility of fusion with the new forms that have been emerging in the fight for human rights.

What has become the dominant form of recognized human rights work—reports documenting violations, shaming and naming through the media, the submission to and advocacy at the UN and regional bodies—will continue to play an important role in advancing human rights. The new forms of working for human rights include making use of these methods when useful, but the overall approach is distinct. Indeed it is so distinct that the groups employing it are often not even seen as being part of what is increasingly and appropriately called not a movement but the “human rights community.” But whether older groups see it or not, these ways of fighting for human rights are part of the something new that is being born. And they represent not the end-times but the future of human rights.

This is also a statement of faith but again, like many faiths, especially those that endure, it is based on experience. In recent years in my new job I have been traveling around the country as well as visiting other countries to help build a new version of the Poor People’s Campaign launched by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in the last months of his life. I and others have met with scores of groups, movements, networks engaged in a wide array of grassroots struggles for social justice. Few of these groups identify themselves as “human rights organizations.” But all of them without exception express easily and often that what they are fighting for is human rights: the right to health care, the right to housing, the right to clean water and a clean environment, the right to safety from police brutality and killings, the right to vote, the right to due process and real justice for both citizens and non-citizens, the right not to be discriminated against

on the basis of race, gender, or sexual orientation, and the right not to be poor. In all of these battles they talk of human rights because those words are still the ones that best express their dignity and the depth of their needs.

But the way those words are put into practice differs from what is usually seen as human rights work in three important ways. First, while these groups want allies, their first commitment is to organize the victims of human rights violations themselves and to help develop and then follow the leadership of the most affected. Secondly, while they often work on the cases of individuals, they see as more central to their mission the fight to change structures and systems, locally, nationally, and even globally. It is these structures and systems, not just bad leaders, that are held primarily responsible for the denial of human rights to millions of individuals. Freed from the increasingly distant baggage of the Cold War that shaped the earlier phase of human rights work, these fighters for human rights are not afraid of being political. They embrace it. This means they use human rights to judge not just acts and policies but the systems that drive those acts and policies. Many have, for example, an important human rights critique of neoliberal capitalism as it exists in this country and around the world. But also learning from and breaking with older revolutionary traditions, their human rights grounding strengthens a commitment to non-violence.

Finally, they not only recognize but often embody the religious dimension of human rights. They do not necessarily or often proclaim a religious affiliation and embrace people of no religious faith. But they know, emerging from the struggles of the poor, the dispossessed and those most affected by the denial of human rights, that spiritual and moral power is essential to enduring what is a very hard and often dangerous fight, and for giving them the vision they are fighting for and the hope that it can be won. The fusion of religions and human rights is not a goal for most of these groups. It is simply their reality.

I will end with just one example of this fusion of faith, human rights and political struggle that demonstrates better than any other I know the tremendous force that is at stake in this discussion. If you want to learn about the reality of the “something new” that is being born, something that draws on, and has won victories with, both human rights and faith, then I urge you to take a good look at the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina.

The Moral Mondays movement began in response to draconian measures directed against virtually all vulnerable communities in North Carolina starting before but reaching alarming heights when the Republicans got control of all branches of government, not unlike what we now have in Washington. On Monday, April 29, 2013, a small group of clergy and activists of faith and no religious faith gathered at the state capital to protest. Some 17 people were arrested in civil disobedience. They kept coming back every Monday in larger numbers. By now, more than 1,000 people have been arrested and the Forward Together Moral Movement has been born and is growing. The movement is led by the most King-like prophetic leader I have encountered in nearly 50 years—the Rev. Dr. William Barber II, who is also the President of the NAACP in North Carolina and now heads a national organization called Repairers of the Breach. This is a bottom-up multi-racial movement made up of activists and more than 200 organizations fighting for a wide range of issues from climate justice, to voting rights, to women and LGBTQ rights, ending police brutality, criminal justice reform, and the rights of the poor. It is called a *fusion movement* because unlike the usual transactional coalitions, groups are called to see the connection between all the issues and to treat every cause as their own.

In 2014 there was an annual march in Raleigh, NC, which we were told, would match the 20,000 people who marched in Selma 50 years ago. It didn't: instead, there were an estimated 80,000 people united on the streets of Raleigh, the largest demonstration in the South as well as

the largest one in history not covered by the New York Times or the Washington Post. That number was equaled or surpassed again this February. More important than the numbers are the spirit and power which have won victories ranging from the striking down of voter repression acts to the removal of the Governor. With other religious leaders, Rev. Barber is now taking the experience of the Moral Mondays movement across the country, carrying out moral revival meetings and trainings in scores of states of both clergy and activists of all faiths, including secular ones, working to build a new moral movement that is merging with the effort to create a new Poor People's Campaign.

The way faith and human rights flow naturally into each other in this movement is reflected in the remarks Rev. Barber made at the time of the very first Moral Mondays action:

We have no other choice but to assemble in the people's house where these bills are being presented, argued, and voted upon, in hopes that God will move in the hearts of our legislators, as he moved in the heart of Pharaoh to let His people go. Some ask the question, why don't they be quiet? Well, I must remind you, that it has been our collective silence that has quietly opened the city gates to these undemocratic violators of our rights.

I think I have made it clear that I am not an objective observer of this "something new" that is being born. But I will just end here by giving what, in my faith tradition, we call a "witness": if you want to experience the future of human rights and religion, and especially to feel the power of religion and human rights coming together, don't just study this movement. Join it.