Section One

Religious Perspectives
I once offered a lecture entitled ‘Christianity and Human Rights’ to an organiser of a conference. He immediately came back with the reply, ‘Well, it’s going to be a very short lecture then.’ One could say the same about this volume’s title, ‘Does God Believe in Human Rights?’, because there is a deep suspicion in many people’s minds that there really isn’t any connection. First of all, there are a number of stories in the Bible that seem to suggest God can do what he likes with Creation – send a flood or destroy millions of people. Then, looking at the great Dooms of medieval English parish churches, one finds most of the human race condemned to eternal torture. In Calvinism, there is the terrible doctrine of ‘double predestination,’ whereby some people are created from the start for eternal Hell, without any choice at all. There are, sadly, some commands in the Bible that suggest that people are entitled to destroy women, children and each other. Allied to that, of course, is the Church’s rather poor record in many respects – the Inquisition of the Middle Ages, the persecution of Jews, pogroms and so on. Then there is the widespread sense that if religion does inculcate moral values, it is primarily in the area of moral responsibility and duties, rather than rights. I shall return to this point later. Finally, among these suspicions is the belief that human rights is a fundamentally secular concept which religion has resisted from the outset.

I want to challenge the notion that human rights is a purely secular concept even in its origin. The American Declaration of Independence in 1776 declared, ‘All men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.’ Indeed, as we know, the Founding Fathers of the United States and of the Constitution were devoutly, fiercely Christian. Even in France, the 1789 Declaration states that it was made ‘in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being.’

Of course, those are not consciously Christian statements. Some of