Do religion and human rights invariably clash? Well, it is certainly true on one level that the Bible is at the core of universal human rights, because they are based essentially on the concept of the dignity of the human person. As the Talmud says, ‘If a single person is destroyed, it is as if the whole world is destroyed; and if a single person is saved, it is as if the whole world is saved.’ However, I personally believe (and I hope I will persuade you) that modern human rights are in direct conflict with religion; furthermore, modern human rights are acting as a solvent on Judeo-Christian values, which they are steadily replacing by a set of secular values tailored for a Godless age, with very damaging effects on our society.

Our society is based on Judeo-Christian values essentially of duty and responsibility. Judaism and Christianity are not fundamentally religions of rights at all. They are religions of duties – duties of the individual to God and duties of man to man, because we are all made in the image of God. Certainly, rights are inferred from those duties, but it is terribly important to realise that religion has it that way round: duty is prior to rights.

This means, for example, that the value and virtue of human freedom is predicated on the need to have constraints on human behaviour. This is one of the paradoxes of freedom. If one doesn’t have constraints imposed by moral codes, one ends up with licence and anarchy, which are in fact inimical to freedom. Even liberalism – which was the great revolt against the overweening authority of religion and is the source of contract law and the separation of Church and State and therefore the source of our modern human rights – even liberalism was essentially a moral project based on the difference between right and wrong that took for granted the constraints on human appetites deriving from the religious rules of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

In my view, the modern human rights culture has replaced that set
of duties, that essential prior set of duties, by a culture of entitlement, which has had a particularly dramatic effect on our society. This is because human rights make a claim to universality, and, being universal, brook no moral opposition and must have primacy over national cultures and laws. But I would say that they are certainly not universal. They cannot possibly be universal because they conflict. The Human Rights Convention and subsequent Acts contain rights that conflict with each other, requiring arbitration by judges. These judges do not originate from any particular jurisdiction (one thinks of the European Court of Human Rights for example), meaning that the human rights project is actually anti-democratic, superseding individual cultures rooted in religious principles.

Human rights principles are said to be Judeo-Christian, but this is not so except on the most banal level of being rooted in the dignity of the human individual, which is taken as read. Rather, they are particular values imposed on a particular culture under a particular set of circumstances: after the Second World War, in response to experiences of mass slaughter, genocide, and the Holocaust of Fascism and totalitarianism, there was an attempt to find a kind of world faith to fill the spiritual void left by Christianity and the Enlightenment. That kind of religious sense, I feel, underpins the passion with which people espouse the human rights culture and will not brook any opposition to it. But there is a conflict between the vision of a society implicit in the human rights culture and religious cultures. The human rights culture is based primarily on the idea that the individual has to be protected from the State; a democracy assumes that in order to bestow rights upon people there must be a collective power created to bestow those rights. Conversely, religion – and I speak particularly of Judaism about which I know a little – has it the opposite way round. In Judaism – and this may be so for Christianity too – human society is seen as a natural phenomenon, part of the order of Creation; therefore human society comes before, is inherently prior, to any kind of contract. Society is thus based on a set of interlocking duties, the idea of human reciprocity giving rise to the saying by the great Rabbi Hillel, ‘What is hateful to you, do not do unto others.’ In other words, the precondition for human society flourishing is that we all have duties to each other.

All humans are created in the image of God. It therefore follows that