Review Essay

Looking at Human Rights through a Near-sighted Single Lens

Samuel Moyn

*Christian Human Rights*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015,

1 Introduction

In *Christian Human Rights*, Samuel Moyn sets out to turn some well-rooted assumptions upside down and reshape the historical landscape of human rights. The human rights we know today, he argues, did not originate in the Enlightenment, nor did they arise from the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, or the 1789 French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. They were also not a response to the atrocities and horror of the two world wars or the Holocaust. Rather, they originated in the 1930s and 1940s and gained currency only in the late 1970s.

Moyn stresses that his main challenge is ‘isolating the crucial period for a strong ideological link of Christianity with human rights’ (p. 6). He is in particular displeased that the annunciation of human rights in the 1940s is viewed as the triumph of liberal democracy. He admits that it was conservative Christianity that embraced liberal principles and human rights, but does not agree that it was a victory for liberalism (pp. 8–9). The focus of the book is, therefore, on the ‘victory’ of Christian human rights as a conservative Christian achievement in the 1940s; an achievement that the secular left would later take ownership of (p. 23). Moyn’s general thesis is that the human rights project was neither secular or left, and should be regarded as a project of the Christian right (p. 8). His book is in fact an attempt to claim back the victory for conservatism.
In his review of *The Last Utopia*, Lindkvist stresses that Moyn’s work is not ‘a full-blown attempt at a definite history of human rights in the modern age’ but a ‘critique of the standard narratives of human rights history’.\(^1\) He describes Moyn’s work as reading ‘close to everything that has been published on human rights history through the lens of connecting historiographies’.\(^2\) However, it seems that Moyn is reading everything too ‘close’ and through a single ‘lens’. Instead of isolating his subject, he isolates his view. He looks at human rights through a single lens of conservatism, which also proves to be very nearsighted. His approach seems more ideological than historical and not that of a historian. This prevents him from seeing the facts as they actually were, not as some conservatives saw, or wished to see, them.

It would have been easy, even unnecessary, to dismiss Moyn’s claim about ‘young’ human rights, if it was based on the same measures used to judge the Earth as ‘young’ and only a few thousand years old. However, he has put forward some historical evidence for his claim that requires examination. In this review essay, I will examine the cogency of Moyn’s thesis. I will argue that Moyn’s theory is misconceived in content and flawed in methodology. He fails to make his case and the evidence he puts forward is too insignificant, isolated and limited.

2 Invention of Human Rights

According to Moyn, it was Christians who did much, perhaps most, to define the idea of human rights in the 1940s, as well as some of its core notions such as the importance of human dignity, which nobody else was yet making central in 1942 (p. 6). In other words, he claims that Christianity invented human dignity and rights (p. 170). During that period, Christian figures such as Pope Pius XII started a process that led to the ‘eventual ideological association of human rights with Christian conservatism’ (p. 16). For Moyn, Pope Pius XII’s Christmas Day speech in 1942 is a ‘critical turning point’ that ‘defined history’ (p. 2) and the most prominent during WWII and ‘likely in the whole history of political claim-making to that date’ (p. 3). There are some major claims in these statements that I will discuss separately.


\(^2\) Ibid.