

Defining the Fundamental Rights of Humanity

James R. Hughes – 2014-11-11

In *The Tyranny of Experts*,¹ William Easterly argues that the existence of rights and freedoms is essential for overcoming the poverty of poor peoples. For example, he states, “[W]e must not let caring about material suffering of the poor change the subject from caring about the rights of the poor.” [p. 339] and, “What you can do is advocate the poor should have the same rights as the rich.” [p. 340]

I agree with Easterly’s underlying premise and his conclusions—i.e., that fighting global poverty and making improvements in health, education, and the local economy, cannot be imposed from above by autocrats and technocrats; and that individuals acting in their own self interests are best equipped to make improvements, if they are given the opportunity. However, there is a glaring gap in Easterly’s analysis. Nowhere does he define ‘rights’. The closest he comes is by qualifying the word ‘rights’ and ‘freedom’—for example, ‘economic rights’, ‘economic freedom’, ‘property rights’, ‘democratic rights’, or ‘political freedom’—or by giving examples such as “prevent[ing] the elite from expropriating the lands of the majority” [p. 168], “Poor people (like rich people) do not like being told to shut up; they like to speak up to protest and government abuses of them.” [p. 150], not having their homes burned down [p. 6], or individuals having a right to migrate [p. 199].

It is ironic that I am writing this essay on the morning of November 11th, as Canada is preparing to observe Remembrance Day (Veterans Day, Armistice Day) after the murder in Ottawa of Corporal Nathan Cirillo, a reservist with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, by an Islamic terrorist. In the Remembrance Day speeches today, someone is sure to make reference to those who died to defend our rights and freedoms.

What are the fundamental human rights which are missing in the countries which are poor? Should we base our definition on the US’s [Bill of Rights](#)? For example, is the right to keep and bear arms (weapons) a fundamental right which every person must have? If so, then why is it excluded from the UN’s [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)? Or, would we defend the *Fifth Amendment’s* statement which prohibits self-incrimination when we observe that Jesus didn’t ‘plead the fifth’, when asked under oath to act as a witness for or against himself (Mt 26.63-64).

The problem of defining fundamental human rights is made more difficult by a number of factors:

1. *A lack of precision in definition.* For example, the UN’s *Declaration* refers to “protection against unemployment”. Does this mean that a person cannot be laid off, or cannot be asked to retire at age 65 or to retire if he is senile, or that he is to be provided with unemployment insurance if he is laid off? Similarly, the concepts of ‘freedom of speech’, ‘freedom of the press’, ‘free exercise of religion’ or the ‘right to peaceably assemble’ are fraught with difficulties when universities prevent Christian student groups from distributing information about abortion or prohibit them from electing only professing Christians to their executive boards, or when municipalities prohibit people from assembling for prayer inside of ‘bubble zones’.
2. *A lack of universal acceptance.* The definition of fundamental human rights has largely been a Western phenomenon, with the development of Common Law, restraints on tyranny, and the results of revolutions (e.g., English, American and French). However, other parts of the world, such

¹ William Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts – Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

as China and countries which endorse Islam as their official religion, do not accept the outcome of this developmental process. For example, some Islamic countries, such as Saudi Arabia, have rejected Western definitions of rights, including the UN's *Declaration*, because they claim that they are inconsistent with the administration of *Sharia* law. And, China is known for its lack of respect for what we call rights through its 'one-child' policy and control over land ownership.

3. *The expanding definition of 'rights'*. The problem of defining basic human rights has been exacerbated by the outpouring of demands for additional 'rights'—from gender-neutral washrooms (as opposed to the right to privacy) and same-sex 'marriage' (as opposed to the right not to have to perform or accommodate them) to being able to parade naked through city streets, have access to government funded health care, and to abortion on demand at any time during a pregnancy.
4. *A lack of an accepted objective standard*. People are naïve if they believe that it is possible to define a truly universal set of human rights and freedoms without reference to a single objective standard. The reality is otherwise. As long as we continue to drink the 'Kool-Aid' of pluralism we will never be able to achieve a workable definition of the fundamental rights of humanity. The idea underlying pluralism—that two or more sets of principles or sources of authority can co-exist—is absurd, since it is a self-defeating concept—conflicting 'principles' cannot both be right.

We can have objective standards for human rights and freedoms only when they are based on the Bible. To achieve this we need to start from first principles—the Bible presents God's standard for human behaviour, men are inherently sinful and rebellious against God, and men do not have any innate rights before God; but men do have basic responsibilities before God, such as to obey the *Ten Commandments*. From there we need to build up a set of 'rights' and 'freedoms' which are logical extensions of what God teaches in his Word. Until we have done this, we should be cautious when we enter into debates about the rights of humanity.