

Religion and Rights: The Contradictions of the Catholic Church

Terence Wood

When Father Joe Hass was faced with a choice between his safety and defending the rights of others, he chose the latter – risking his life in the process. Hass, a Catholic Priest working in West Papua had, in the words of English journalist George Monbiot, ‘spent his life acting as a human shield for the indigenous people of Indonesia’ⁱ. This activism led to Indonesian soldiers threatening to kill him numerous times. Yet, despite these threats, Hass chose to stay in the swamp-forests of West Papua defending the people of the area. He even went as far as surrendering his Austrian citizenship so that he could remain in Indonesia. According to Monbiot, Hass’s bravery in protecting the people of West Papua stemmed, at least in part, from his religious beliefⁱⁱ.

West Papua is not the only part of the world where Catholic beliefs have gone hand in hand with the defence of human rights. In 1981, Father Stanley Rother, an American priest, found himself in the middle of conflict between communist rebels and the Guatemalan military. Not only was his Santiago Atitlán parish at the heart of the fighting but it was also home to large numbers of indigenous Guatemalans: people who the military associated with the communists and whose rights were repeatedly violated. It was a time when, in the words of Father Rother, “shaking hands with an Indian...[became] a political act”ⁱⁱⁱ. Yet Rother did just this, associating with Mayans and defending his parishioners. And, as a result, he received death threats. At first, following the threats, Father Rother fled the country; but once he was back in Oklahoma, he decided that his parishioners needed him more than he needed his safety, so he returned to the war-zone. Within four months he was dead, shot twice in the head by members of a right-wing death squad^{iv}.

Death squads were also behind the 1998 murder of Archbishop Juan Gerardi in Guatemala City. Up until his death, Gerardi had campaigned tirelessly for human rights. Just two days before he was murdered, he had published a damning report implicating the military in the vast majority of the crimes that took place during the Guatemalan civil war^v.

Throughout Latin American history, there are numerous other examples of Catholic priests and nuns placing themselves in harm’s way protecting others. Catholics, who are part of a tradition that goes all the way back to Bartolomé de Las Casas, the campaigning sixteenth century priest who argued the cause of Native Americans during the Spanish conquest. Yet, despite the unquestionable bravery of these individuals, the Catholic Church itself has a much murkier history when it comes to human rights. For every defender of human rights within the Church, there are examples of others who remained silent or actively conspired with dictatorial regimes. Pope Pius XII, for example, failed to speak out against the Holocaust^{vi}, while the Opus Dei sect of the Catholic Church supported first Franco in Spain, then Pinochet in Chile^{vii}.

The Catholic Church's record is particularly bad when it comes to sexual and reproductive rights. In El Salvador, the Church was instrumental in the passing of laws that prohibit abortion in all circumstances, including those where the mother's life is in danger. Never mind debates about the respective rights of the mother and the foetus, in El Salvador, abortion is prohibited even in the case of ectopic pregnancies – pregnancies in which the foetus never survives and which pose considerable health risks for the mother. The punishment for having an abortion in El Salvador can be over 30 years in jail^{viii}.

The Catholic Church has also remained steadfast in its opposition to contraception, even in the face of the HIV epidemic, where condom use is the one thing standing between millions of people and infection. Not only has the Church opposed condoms, but it has also been actively dishonest about the protection they provide against HIV. The head of the Vatican's Office on the Family, Alfonso López Trujillo, proclaimed that condoms contain tiny holes that let the HIV virus through, while the Archbishop of Nairobi went even further, arguing that condoms actually assisted the spread of AIDS.^{ix}

The contradictions in the Catholic Church's relationship with human rights raise a deeper question about the relationship between religion and rights issues. Why does faith inspire some people to defend human rights and others to repress them? The answers to this question aren't immediately apparent. But they are important: approximately 85% of the world's population is religious and, if human rights are to be secured globally, part of the task will involve ensuring that the positive influence of religion far outweighs the negative.

Terence Wood is a Dev-Zone Information Officer and Team Leader. He also works part time in the Development Studies department of Victoria University.

ⁱ Monbiot, G. 2005. 'Better off Without Him', *The Guardian*, 11/10/05. Online at: <http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2005/10/11/better-off-without-him/>

ⁱⁱ Monbiot, G. 2005. 'Better off Without Him', *The Guardian*, Online at: <http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2005/10/11/better-off-without-him/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Travelnow.com, n.d., 'Santiago Atitlan', Online at: <http://dg.travelnow.com/index.jsp?cid=1&action=viewLocation&locationId=35726>

^{iv} Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, n.d., 'Oklahoma missionary murdered in Guatemala', Online at: <http://www.catharchdioceseokc.org/history/Murder.htm>

^v Hicks, S. 2004, *Uncovering the Scandal of Impunity in Guatemala*, Online at: <http://www.clas.berkeley.edu:7001/Events/spring2004/02-23-04-goldman/index.html>

^{vi} BBC, 1998, Vatican apologises over holocaust, Online at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/65889.stm>

^{vii} Hari, J. 2004, 'Islam isn't the only religion to spawn deadly sects. Look at the Roman Catholic Church and Opus Dei', *The Independent*, 12/8/04, Online at: <http://www.johannhari.com/archive/article.php?id=433>

^{viii} Hitt, J. 2006, 'Pro-Life Nation', *New York Times Magazine*, April 9 2006.

^{ix} Hari, J. 2005, 'History will judge the Pope far more harshly than the adoring crowds in Rome', *The Independent*, 8/4/05, Online at: <http://www.johannhari.com/archive/article.php?id=596>

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