

Holloway, Carson. *The Way of Life: John Paul II and the Challenge of Liberal Modernity*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008. vii + 189pp. \$29.95 paperback.

Carson Holloway opens his work with the question: “Can modern society maintain its commitment to human dignity and human rights without religion?” (ix). In answer, he juxtaposes two competing alternatives—one based on the theological anthropology articulated in John Paul II’s *Evangelium Vitae* and the other arising from the political works of classical modern philosophers—and argues “no.” To modern ears Holloway’s thesis no doubt sounds counterintuitive. After all, one of modernity’s chief concerns, it would seem, has been the promotion of human rights and the spread of freedom to those parts of the globe, shrinking though they may be, that have not yet tasted the sweet liberty of democracy. Yet, as Holloway forcefully argues, there arises at the very heart of modernity’s philosophical foundations a picture of man marked by self-interested and materialistic hedonism. On such a view, rights do not emerge as a consequence of any dignity intrinsic to human nature but, as Thomas Hobbes would have it, only as a means of securing one’s own self-interest and the satisfaction of his passions (Chapter 3). Put simply, human rights have no intrinsic value in and of themselves but are “merely posited as part of a mutual nonaggression pact among selfish individuals” (153).

History, of course, has an unlimited store of “nonaggression pacts” that are dissolved and along with them the rights they purportedly guarantee when particular interests are no longer served. What is more, this self-interested account of human nature and its enfeebled rights, though partially attenuated by John Locke’s law of nature (Chapter 4) and David Hume’s doctrine of sociability and moral sympathy (Chapter 5), persists nonetheless, especially when one’s sentiments conflict with those of another. Moreover, this very utilitarian view of human nature, Holloway argues, functions at the heart of America’s founding (Chapter 6). Though one encounters the rhetoric of equality, liberty, happiness, *et cetera* within the Declaration of Independence, there is no philosophical anthropology provided to support its claims. This lack of a clear grounding for human rights coupled with certain Hobbesian influences leads once again to a self-interested account of rights; Holloway writes “[I]t would seem that over time... the American mind... had tended increasingly to embrace the kind of Hobbesian individualism and hedonism that make the moral law appear a burden and respect for the rights of others a matter of mere self-interested calculation” (121).

In contrast, Holloway offers John Paul II's anthropology as a firm ground whereupon to build a robust notion of human rights (Chapter 2). John Paul II argues that, as a creature, man receives his life—indeed, his very being—from God as a gift. Yet, the creatureliness that man possesses is unique in that he alone has been made in the image of God, as an end in itself, and ordained to communion. Man's personhood invests him with an inviolable dignity such that, while one does indeed possess ownership of himself, that gift of personhood must be received with reverential respect, not with reckless license. A person's value and dignity are received as a gift and cannot be determined by his usefulness or productivity; to claim otherwise leads precisely to what John Paul II describes as the culture of death in which the weakest and the least useful or burdensome suffer a devaluation and thereby a suspension of rights. When rights are grounded on a sublime dignity received as a gift, however, they retain a fixed and solid character that is grounded in one's relationship to the divine.

In his examination of John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae* Holloway tells us that that particular encyclical forms the late pontiff's most "mature statement of politics and culture" (4). While Holloway might be correct in that claim, *Evangelium Vitae* by no means represents John Paul II's most sustained and deepest thought on personhood and thereby the foundations of culture, politics, and morality. I doubt Holloway would dispute this last claim, but I find it surprising that he makes no mention of John Paul II's other equally important works that pertain directly to human personhood, for instance, *Love and Responsibility*, *Theology of the Body*, *The Acting Person*, or even Wojtya's collected essays presented in *Person and Community*. If recovering a robust notion of personhood is crucial in the effort of securing human rights, as Holloway ably argues throughout his work, then why not bring to bear the full and rich resources that John Paul II's himself offers in this regard?

Also surprisingly absent from Holloway's study is any treatment or mention of Immanuel Kant. If one of the central concerns of Holloway's work is a consideration of John Paul II's engagement with contemporary social and political structures, then he would be hard-pressed to overlook the seminal importance of Kant in that cultural landscape. Much of what Holloway finds wrong with liberal modernity, namely, its reductive hedonistic focus and instrumentalization of the human person, would likewise be repulsive to Kant's moral sensibilities. In fact, when it comes to the intrinsic dignity and value of each person, one finds a great deal of affinity between Kant and John Paul II. One readily observes, for instance, a striking similarity between Kant's

second formulation of the categorical imperative and Wojtyła's "personalistic norm." Kant tells us, "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means,"¹ to which the late pontiff would seem to concur, stating, "the person is the kind of good which does not admit of use and cannot be treated as an object of use and as such the means to an end."²

I do not intend to suggest here that John Paul II is simply Kant *redivivus*, nor do I mean to imply that the inclusion of Kant would ultimately compromise Holloway's thesis. I do think, however, that a treatment of Kant, while it would challenge Holloway's argument, is a complexity that needs to be addressed where the question of the relationship between human rights and religion is raised. Kant certainly sees himself as providing a secure foundation for human rights in which the intrinsic dignity of each person commands respect as an end in itself; yet, he does so without making appeal to religion but only pure practical reason itself.

Be that as it may, in the midst of globalization and political debates about the best way to bring democracy to more portions of the world, Holloway's work is a timely one. It brings into much-needed resolution what is at stake in claims made pertaining to human dignity and inquires into the manner in which that dignity might serve as the foundation for human rights. His volume also serves as a healthy alternative to thinkers who argue that notions such as personhood are insufficient to the task of grounding a robust notion of human rights.³

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Notes

1. Immanuel Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 429; trans. James Ellington (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), 36.

2. *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1993), 41.

3. E.g., John Haughey, S.J., "With Human Rights the 'New Humanism' is Half-Way There," presented at *The Call to Justice: The Legacy of Gaudium et Spes 40 Years After*, March 17, 2005, Vatican City; Robert Kraynack, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).