HUMAN RIGHTS AND JUSTICE IN A VIOLENT WORLD: A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: Human Rights and Justice in a Violent World: A Christian Perspective.

This paper explores the intersection of human rights, justice, and Christian theology as a response to violence and injustice. It demonstrates how Christian theology, grounded in the *imago Dei* affirms human dignity and provides a transformative framework for justice that prioritizes restoration, reconciliation, and *shalom*. Providing a critical analysis of violence in its various forms and its root causes, and an evaluation of the limitations of existing justice mechanisms and international frameworks the paper advocates for restorative and transformative justice models rooted in biblical principles of accountability, healing, and reconciliation. It calls for Christians to center the marginalized, engage in nonviolent resistance, and critique systemic structures of oppression. The global church is positioned as a critical actor, leveraging its resources and collective voice to address local and global challenges. It challenges Christians to embody God's character in their pursuit of justice, advocate for human rights, and contribute to systemic change. Grounded in eschatological hope, it envisions a redemptive mission where the church becomes a beacon of peace, justice, and healing in a fractured world.

Keywords: *Imago Dei, justice, human rights, shalom, reconciliation, restorative justice, systemic sin, nonviolence.*

Introduction

The world nowadays is marked by violence, manifested as wars, terrorism, systemic oppression, and structural inequality. These are realities that erode human dignity, displace millions, and perpetuate cycles of suffering and injustice. While human rights frameworks aim to safeguard dignity

and equality, they are often undermined by political expediency, cultural relativism, and deeply rooted systemic sin. Traditional approaches to justice frequently fall short of addressing the deep wounds caused by violence, leaving individuals and communities yearning for restoration.

Christian theology, however, can offer viable alternatives, rooted in the affirmation that all humans, being created in the image of God (*imago Dei*), have inherent worth. This theological foundation calls for a justice that reflects God's character, emphasizing restoration, reconciliation, and holistic peace (*shalom*). Christianity also acknowledges the pervasive impact of sin, which distorts human relationships and institutions. This dual recognition critiques the inadequacies of secular justice mechanisms while offering a hopeful vision for transformation. By emphasizing the sacredness of human life, the approach below will hopefully inspire action toward a more just and peaceful world. We therefore hope to illuminate how theological principles can address contemporary challenges, providing a pathway for faith-driven engagement in the pursuit of justice.

Conceptual Foundations

The concepts of "human rights" and "justice"[1] are central to the discussion in this paper, particularly as they are explored through a Christian lens. To lay a solid foundation for this exploration, it is essential to clarify what is meant by each of these terms and how they interrelate within theological and ethical frameworks.

On Human Rights

Human rights are commonly understood as universal principles that protect the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of their background, beliefs, or circumstances. These rights serve as a foundation for justice, equality, and freedom in society. To fully grasp the concept of human rights, it is essential to explore their philosophical, legal, and theological underpinnings, with special attention to the Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei* as a foundational framework for affirming human dignity.

The idea of human rights has its roots in philosophical traditions that emphasize the intrinsic value of the individual. Enlightenment think-

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1   See Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "A look at how the concept of human rights has evolved over time", *Journal For Freedom of Conscience (Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință)* 11.2 (2023), pp.825-874.

ers such as John Locke[2] and Immanuel Kant[3] were instrumental in articulating concepts of natural rights and moral autonomy. Locke argued that human beings, by virtue of their rationality and free will, possess inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property. Kant further emphasized the moral imperative to treat individuals as ends in themselves, not merely as means to an end. These ideas helped lay the groundwork for the development of universal human rights, underscoring the belief that dignity is an essential characteristic of humanity.[4] However, philosophical frameworks alone are often critiqued for their reliance on abstract reasoning, which can lack the moral force to compel action in the face of systemic injustice. The universality of human rights, for example, is frequently challenged by cultural relativism, which argues that moral values and rights are culturally specific rather than universally applicable. This tension highlights the need for a deeper moral and spiritual grounding for human rights.

The modern legal framework for human rights emerged in the aftermath of World War II, with the establishment of the United Nations and the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948. The UDHR enshrines the principles of equality, freedom, and non-discrimination, asserting that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights."[5] This legal codification of human rights seeks to provide a universal standard for protecting individuals from violence, oppression, and exploitation. International human rights laws build on this foundation, with treaties such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)[6] and the International

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2   See John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, Indianapolis & Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 1980.

3   See Immanuel Kant, *To Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*, Indianapolis & Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 2003; Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997; Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

4   See Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Plea for Human Dignity", *Scientia Moralitas. Human Dignity - A Contemporary Perspectives*, The Scientia Moralitas Research Institute, Beltsville, MD, United States of America, 2016, Vol. 1, pp. 29-43.

5   See *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights* [online]: available at: <URL:https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/2021/03/udhr.pdf> [accessed 16 October 2024].

6   See *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* [online]: available at: <URL:https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/ccpr.pdf> [accessed 16 October 2024].

Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).[7] These instruments, and other similar documents, aim to ensure that governments are held accountable for upholding the dignity and rights of their citizens. However, despite these advancements, the implementation of human rights remains uneven, with enforcement often hindered by geopolitical interests and a lack of political will.

From a Christian perspective, the concept of human rights finds its deepest foundation in the biblical doctrine of the *imago Dei*. Genesis 1:26-27 declares that humanity is created in the image and likeness of God, which is to be taken as a profound affirmation of human dignity and worth.[8] This theological truth establishes that every person, regardless of status or condition, reflects the divine and therefore possesses inherent value.[9] The *imago Dei* has therefore significant implications for understanding and upholding human rights. First, it provides a moral and spiritual grounding that transcends cultural and philosophical debates. Human dignity is not derived from societal norms or governmental decrees but is rooted in God's creative act. Second, it underscores the universality of human rights. Since all people are created in God's image, dignity and rights are not contingent upon nationality, ethnicity, belief systems, or any other criteria of identification humans use.[10] Rather, as the biblical narrative emphasizes the relational aspect of the *imago Dei*, humanity's reflection of God includes a call to live in community, embodying justice, mercy, and love. This relational dimension aligns with the goals of human rights, which seek to create societies where individuals can flourish in freedom and equality. In this way the Christian doctrine of the *imago Dei* uniquely contributes to the discourse on human rights and justice by affirming the sacredness of human life and challenging systems of oppression and dehumanization.

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7   See *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights* [online]: available at: <URL:https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/cescr.pdf> [accessed 16 October 2024].

8   See Marcel Măcelaru, "Created in God's Image: Human Dignity in Biblical Perspective", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință* 9.3 (2021), pp. 596-608.

9   See Ligia-Mariana Măcelaru, "Disability and Human Dignity: On the *Imago Dei* as Proof of Human Worth", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință* 9.3 (2021), pp. 584-595. See also Iosif Riviș-Tipei, "Human Dignity and the Problem of Evil", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință* 9.3 (2021), pp. 618-628.

10   See Marcel Măcelaru, "Toward a Biblical Understanding of Equality", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință* 10.2 (2022), pp. 621-629.

By examining human rights through philosophical, legal, and theological lenses, a more comprehensive understanding emerges. Philosophical principles provide the intellectual basis for human rights, legal frameworks offer mechanisms for protection and enforcement, and theological insights ground these rights in a transcendent moral order. Ultimately, defining human rights through this integrated approach not only clarifies their purpose but also highlights their profound significance in addressing violence and injustice. As we will argue in the reminder of this paper, Christian theology, with its emphasis on the *imago Dei*, and the ethical implications of this doctrine, offers a transformative vision for justice and human dignity that can inspire meaningful engagement in the pursuit of human rights.

Theories of Justice

Justice is a central concept in both secular and theological discourse, representing the pursuit of fairness, equity, and the restoration of order in society. Theories of justice, including retributive, restorative, and transformative justice, provide frameworks for understanding and addressing wrongs. Examining these theories through the lens of Christian ethics and biblical narratives offers unique insights into their purpose and application, emphasizing the holistic and redemptive nature of justice as envisioned in Scripture.

To start with, retributive justice[11] focuses on punishment for wrongdoing, emphasizing accountability and proportionality. Rooted in the principle of "an eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:24), it seeks to deter crime, protect society, and satisfy the moral demand that wrongs must be met with consequences. While this model is foundational in many legal systems, it has been critiqued for prioritizing punishment over restoration and neglecting the relational and societal dimensions of justice. In Christian ethics, retributive justice is not dismissed but is understood within the broader context of God's justice. The Old Testament legal codes, including laws of

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11   See Michael Wenzel and Tyler G. Okimoto, "Retributive Justice", in Clara Sabbagh and Manfred Schmitt (eds), *Handbook of Social Justice theory and Research*, New York, Springer, 2016, pp. 237-256. See also Donald H.J. Hermann, "Restorative Justice and Retributive Justice: An Opportunity for Cooperation or an Occasion for Conflict in the Search for Justice", *Seattle Journal for Social Justice* 16.1 (2017), pp. 71-103; Michael Wenzel, et al., "Retributive and Restorative Justice", *Law and Human Behavior* 32 (2008), pp. 375-389.

retribution, reflect a desire to maintain social order and uphold the sanctity of life. However, these laws also reveal the limitations of human justice and the need for divine mercy. The New Testament shifts the emphasis from retribution to grace, with Christ's sacrifice fulfilling the demands of justice while extending forgiveness to sinners (Romans 3:25-26). This theological perspective critiques the purely punitive focus of retributive justice, calling for a justice system that balances accountability with compassion and redemption.

Restorative justice,[12] on the other hand, seeks to repair the harm caused by wrongdoing by prioritizing the needs of victims, offenders, and the community. Unlike retributive justice, which centers on punishment, restorative justice emphasizes healing, reconciliation, and the restoration of relationships. This approach aligns closely with biblical principles and narratives that highlight God's desire for reconciliation and wholeness. The story of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10) illustrates restorative justice in action. When Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, he not only repents of his wrongdoing but also commits to making restitution by giving half his possessions to the poor and repaying those he defrauded fourfold. This narrative demonstrates the transformative power of repentance and restoration, reflecting God's justice as relational and redemptive. Christian ethics further grounds restorative justice in the concept of *shalom*, the biblical vision of peace and flourishing. Justice is not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of right relationships – with God, others, and creation. Restorative justice aligns with this vision by addressing the root causes of harm, fostering forgiveness, and promoting communal healing.

Transformative justice[13] goes beyond restoration to address the systemic and structural injustices that perpetuate harm. It seeks to transform

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12   See Ronald L. Cohen, "Restorative Justice", in Clara Sabbagh and Manfred Schmitt (eds), *Handbook of Social Justice theory and Research*, New York, Springer, 2016, pp.257-274. See also Hermann, "Restorative Justice and Retributive Justice, pp. 71-103; Wenzel, et al., "Retributive and Restorative Justice", pp. 375-389.
13   See Paul Gready, "Transformative Justice", in Jens Meierhenrich, Alexander Laban Hinton and Lawrence Douglas (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Transitional Justice*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2023 [online]: available at: <URL:https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780198704355.013.3> [accessed 15 September 2024]. See also Anthony J. Nocella, II, "An Overview of the History and Theory of Transformative Justice", *Peace & Conflict Review* 6.1 (2011), pp. 1-10.

not only individual relationships but also the societal conditions that enable oppression and violence. This approach resonates with the prophetic tradition in Scripture, which consistently calls for social transformation and the dismantling of systems that exploit the vulnerable. The prophet Amos declares, "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24), a call for justice that disrupts entrenched systems of inequality. Similarly, Jesus' ministry challenged societal norms and structures, advocating for the marginalized and calling for the establishment of God's kingdom – a vision of justice that transforms both individuals and society (Luke 4:18-19). Transformative justice, therefore, aligns with Christian ethics by addressing the root causes of injustice, such as poverty, discrimination, and systemic sin. It calls for active participation in God's redemptive work, empowering individuals and communities to create conditions where justice and dignity flourish.

As hinted above, Christian ethics integrates retributive, restorative, and transformative justice into a holistic framework that reflects God's character and purposes. Retributive justice acknowledges the seriousness of sin and the need for accountability, while restorative justice emphasizes healing and reconciliation. Transformative justice challenges Christians to confront systemic evil and work toward societal renewal. Together, these dimensions of justice reveal a redemptive vision grounded in God's love and justice. The cross of Christ embodies this synthesis. In the crucifixion, retributive justice is fulfilled as Christ bears the penalty for sin. Simultaneously, restorative justice is enacted as humanity is reconciled to God, and transformative justice begins as the resurrection inaugurates a new creation. This central Christian event provides a model for how justice can be pursued in ways that balance accountability, healing, and transformation.

Examining theories of justice through a Christian lens reveals their potential for addressing wrongdoing while highlighting their limitations when divorced from God's redemptive purposes. Christian ethics and biblical narratives call for a justice that goes beyond punishment to seek restoration and transformation, embodying God's vision for a just and reconciled world. This holistic approach challenges Christians to pursue justice that reflects God's character, offering hope and healing in a world marked by violence and brokenness.

The Interrelation of Human Rights and Christian Justice

The concepts of human rights and justice are deeply interconnected, sharing a common commitment to the dignity, equality, and flourishing of all people. While human rights frameworks provide legal and philosophical tools for protecting individuals and communities, Christian theology offers a moral and spiritual foundation that both enriches and critiques these frameworks. By grounding justice in the divine character and redemptive purposes, Christian theology deepens the understanding and application of human rights, emphasizing their relational, universal dimensions. Seen in this light, the duty of Christians is to pursue a justice that is restorative, relational, and transformative, offering a vision of human flourishing that reflects God's kingdom. This holistic approach challenges individuals and communities to advocate for human rights in ways that embody the justice and mercy of God, bringing hope and healing to a broken world.

Contextualizing Violence

Violence is a pervasive and multifaceted reality that manifests in various forms across different contexts. It disrupts social harmony, undermines human dignity, and perpetuates cycles of harm. Understanding violence in its specific cultural, historical, and systemic dimensions is crucial for addressing its root causes and developing effective responses. Christian theology provides a unique lens for contextualizing violence, offering both a critique of its manifestations and a vision for transformation.

Forms of Violence and Their Impact

Violence is not a monolithic phenomenon but takes diverse forms. Each of these has distinct causes and consequences, shaping individual lives and societies in profound ways. The more pervasive examples are:

+ *Political Violence* refers to conflicts over power and governance, which often escalate into armed struggles, coups, or suppression of dissent. These conflicts displace populations, destabilize regions, and lead to human rights violations.[14]

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14   See Vincenzo Ruggiero, "Political Violence: A Typology", *Kriminologijos Studios* 5 (2017), pp. 43-63.

- *Terrorism* is the use of fear and violence to achieve ideological goals. It targets civilians and creates widespread trauma. Its impact extends beyond physical harm to disrupt social cohesion and perpetuate cycles of retaliation.[15]
- *Gender-Based Violence* refers to discrimination and harm directed at individuals based on gender, often rooted in "patriarchal" systems. The victims are usually women and girls. This kind of violence leads to long-term physical, emotional, and economic consequences.[16]
- *Structural Violence* refers to the systemic inequities embedded in social, political, and economic structures. These deprive individuals of basic rights and opportunities. Poverty, racism, and healthcare disparities exemplify how violence can be normalized within institutions.[17]
- *State-Sponsored Violence* occurs when governments abuse their power to maintain control or suppress opposition. The result is oppression of their citizens and use of violent means to silence marginalized groups.[18]

Each of these forms of violence reveals the complexity of human brokenness and the systemic nature of sin, calling for nuanced and contextual responses.

Christian Engagement with Violence and Its Causes

At its core, violence reflects the pervasive impact of sin, both individual and systemic. Sin disrupts the harmony intended by God, leading to alienation and hostility in human relationships and societies. Systemic sin compounds this reality by embedding injustice within institutions and structures, creating environments where violence is normalized and perpetuated.[19] Moreover, in this context we should mention the role of power

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15   See K.R. Carriere, G. Garney and F.M. Moghaddam, "Terrorism as a Form of Violence", in A. T. Vazsonyi, D. Flannery and M. DeLisi (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Violent Behavior and Aggression*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 626-644.
16   See Gretchen Kerr, *Gender-Based Violence in Children's Sport*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2022, pp. 33-45.
17   See Karol Chrobak, "Structural Violence", *Horyzonty Polityki* 13.42 (2022), pp. 171-186.
18   See M.G. Torres, "State Violence", in A.J. Treviño (ed.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Social Problems*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, pp. 381-398.
19   See Iosif Riviş-Tipei, *The Problem of Evil*, Arad, Ars Theologica, 2024, pp. 67-100.

dynamics in the perpetuation of violence.[20] The misuse of power often underpins the various forms of violence listed above.

Christian engagement with violence involves both critique and action. Theologically, Christians are called to denounce all forms of violence that degrade human dignity and disrupt God's intended harmony. Practically, they are called to embody God's peace by working for justice, reconciliation, and systemic transformation.

The ministry of Jesus provides a model for this engagement. Jesus confronted violence with nonviolence, resisted systemic oppression, and extended grace and healing to victims and perpetrators alike. His life and teachings challenge Christians to respond to violence with humility, courage, and a commitment to restorative justice. He consistently subverted power structures that oppressed the vulnerable. His teachings emphasized servant leadership and the use of power to uplift others rather than dominate them (Mark 10:42-45). This countercultural approach provides a framework for addressing the power dynamics and other causes that underlie violence, advocating for justice, humility, and the restoration of right relationships.[21]

The apostle Paul also highlights this dynamic in Ephesians 6:12, where he states that "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world." This recognition of systemic evil calls Christians to address not only individual acts of violence but also the structures that sustain them. The biblical vision of *shalom* – a state of holistic peace and flourishing – stands in stark contrast to the chaos of violence, offering a hopeful alternative rooted in God's redemptive purposes.

To conclude, addressing violence requires understanding its diverse forms and systemic underpinnings. Christian theology offers a profound critique of violence while providing a redemptive framework for addressing it. By challenging power dynamics, systemic sin, and cultural norms that perpetuate harm, Christians are called to embody God's vision of *shalom*, working toward a world where justice, peace, and human dignity prevail.

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20   See Iosif Riviș-Tipei, "The Problem of Evil. Part One: Evil in Philosophical Discourse", *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences* 11.2 (2020), pp. 151-163.
21   See K.W. Lampley, "The Gospel of Jesus Christ and Violence", in K.W. Lampley, *A Theological Account of Nat Turner*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 91-122.

Justice Mechanisms and International Frameworks in Christian Perspective

There are various justice mechanisms and international frameworks designed to address violence and injustice.[22] While these approaches have achieved some success, they are not without limitations. Christian theology offers valuable insights that can enhance and deepen these efforts, providing a more holistic and transformative perspective.

Justice Mechanisms

Justice mechanisms play a vital role in addressing past wrongs, restoring relationships, and fostering sustainable peace in contexts of violence and systemic oppression. These mechanisms include transitional justice, restorative justice, and truth and reconciliation processes. From a Christian perspective, they are more than procedural tools; they represent opportunities to reflect God's redemptive purposes.

- *Transitional justice*[23] involves measures such as criminal prosecutions, reparations, and truth-telling to address human rights violations and promote accountability. Christian theology enriches this framework by balancing accountability with forgiveness, as demonstrated by Christ's sacrificial justice.
- *Restorative justice*, as seen earlier, emphasizes repairing harm by addressing the needs of victims, offenders, and communities. It prioritizes healing over punishment through mechanisms like victim-offender dialogues and community mediation. Deeply rooted in Christian theology, restorative justice mirrors biblical principles of reconciliation and *shalom*.
- *Truth-telling and reconciliation processes* aim to uncover past injustices and promote healing through acknowledgment and accountability. Grounded in biblical teachings, truth-telling establishes a foundation for justice and freedom, while reconciliation reflects the heart of the

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22   See A. Bisset, "Post-Conflict Justice Mechanisms", in S. Sayapin, et al. (eds), *International Conflict and Security Law*, The Hague, T.M.C. Asser Press, 2022, pp. 651-671.

23   See Susanne Buckley-Zistel, "Transitional Justice", in Chris Brown and Robyn Eckersley (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of International Political Theory*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 153-165.

Gospel. These processes face challenges, such as resistance and the difficulty of balancing justice with healing, yet offer profound opportunities for personal and societal renewal.

Justice mechanisms are not without limitations, often hindered by political, cultural, and logistical obstacles. However, Christian theology provides hope and inspiration, advocating for justice that combines accountability, forgiveness, and transformation. Churches and Christian organizations have a critical role in fostering reconciliation, addressing systemic injustices, and reflecting God's justice and mercy. Together, these mechanisms advance a vision of justice that heals and transforms, working toward peace and restoration in a broken world.

International Frameworks

International frameworks, such as the United Nations (UN), international treaties, and the International Criminal Court (ICC), are crucial for addressing violence, promoting human rights, and fostering peace. These systems aim to uphold justice and protect human dignity through mechanisms like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and regional bodies like the European Court of Human Rights. Despite their achievements in prosecuting war criminals and advancing human rights standards, these frameworks face challenges, including enforcement gaps, selectivity, and cultural relativism, which hinder their effectiveness and equity.

Christian theology offers a constructive critique of these frameworks, emphasizing the inherent worth of every person as created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). This theological affirmation aligns with the UDHR while urging deeper engagement with marginalized groups often overlooked by global systems. Additionally, Christian perspectives critique the misuse of power and political interests that distort international justice mechanisms, advocating for accountability and fairness in addressing systemic injustices.

Unlike the retributive focus of many international mechanisms, Christian theology emphasizes reconciliation and restoration. Drawing on the example of the cross, which balances accountability with forgiveness, Christians are encouraged to advocate for restorative approaches within global frameworks. This perspective also challenges international institu-

tions to address root causes of violence, such as economic inequality and systemic exploitation, rather than focusing solely on immediate violations.

Christians are called to engage international frameworks through advocacy, partnerships, and witness, promoting policies aligned with biblical values of justice and peace. Historical contributions by Christian organizations, like the World Council of Churches, demonstrate how faith-based engagement can enrich these systems. By critiquing and improving these frameworks, Christians can help create a global order that reflects God's justice, prioritizes the vulnerable, and works toward reconciliation and systemic transformation.

Ethical and Theological Perspectives – Enriching the Discussion

The pursuit of justice and human rights in a violent world is deeply intertwined with ethical and theological considerations. Christian theology and ethics can provide a moral compass and spiritual grounding that inform how individuals and societies address violence, promote dignity, and seek reconciliation. While ethical frameworks offer principles for navigating complex situations, theology brings a redemptive vision rooted in God's character and purposes. Together, they shape a holistic approach to justice that transcends mere legal or procedural responses.

Ethical and theological perspectives offer complementary frameworks for addressing violence and injustice, combining practical principles with a transformative vision. Thus, *Deontological ethics*, which focuses on universal moral duties like honesty and fairness,[24] ought to be aligned with Christian teachings on human dignity and respect for all. *Utilitarian ethics*, which emphasizes the greatest good,[25] ought to be "tempered" in light of the Gospel so that its pursuit of "common good" is not done to the detriment of vulnerable individuals and groups, underscoring therefore the need to protect human dignity above majority interests. *Virtue ethics*, which highlights the importance of character traits such as justice, courage, and compassion,[26] is resonating with the Christian call to reflect Christ's character.

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24   See Khasanova Dilbar, "The Principles of Deontological Ethics", *Academicia Globe Inderscience Research* 2.5 (2024), pp. 56-59.

25   See A. Quinton, "Utilitarian Ethics", in W.D. Hudson (ed.), *New Studies in Ethic. Volume Two: Moern Theories*, London, Palgrave, 1974, pp. 1-118.

26   See Linda Zagzebski, "Virtue Ethics", *Think* 22.63 (2023), pp. 15-21.

As stated earlier, theologically speaking, the *imago Dei* affirms that all humans are created in God's image, providing a foundation for justice and human rights. Moreover, Biblical justice (*mishpat*) emphasizes relational restoration and reconciliation,[27] as seen in the story of the prodigal son, aligning with the Christian pursuit of *shalom*.[28] Forgiveness and reconciliation are central to Christian justice, breaking cycles of vengeance and fostering healing, as taught by Paul's ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18). Christian theology also confronts sin, both individual and systemic, challenging structures that perpetuate oppression and offering a redemptive response through the cross of Christ, where justice and mercy coexist.

Challenges and Christian Alternatives in Addressing Violence and Injustice

Efforts to address violence and injustice through established frameworks often face significant critiques. Below we note several challenges, highlighting limitations in human rights systems, justice mechanisms, and theological responses, revealing gaps that require thoughtful engagement and innovative alternatives. By addressing these shortcomings, Christians are uniquely positioned to offer redemptive solutions rooted in theological wisdom and practical action.

Critiques of Human Rights Frameworks

Firstly, human rights frameworks have been critiqued[29] for their western-centric bias. It has been argued that modern human rights frameworks are rooted in Western philosophical traditions, which can marginalize non-Western cultural and religious perspectives. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)[30] emphasizes individual

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27 See Leroy H. Pelton, "Biblical Justice", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 71.4 (2003), pp. 737-765.
28 See Iosif Riviș-Tipei, "Peace and Peacemaking in the Bible and Beyond", *Caesura* 10.1 (2023), pp. 76-84.
29 See John Witte and Justin J. Latterell, "Christianity and Human Rights: Past Contributions and Future Challenges", *Journal of Law and Religion* 30 (2015), pp. 353-385.
30 See Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "The Transylvanian Diet: A Precedent to Human Rights and Religious Freedom - 400 Years Prior to the Universal Declaration of Human

autonomy, often at the expense of communal or collective values central to other cultures. This perceived cultural imperialism can lead to resistance and partial implementation in diverse global contexts. However, the biblical affirmation of the *imago Dei* provides a universal basis for human rights that transcends cultural boundaries. By emphasizing both individual dignity and communal responsibility, Christian theology can offer a more inclusive and balanced framework that resonates across cultures.

Secondly, human rights mechanisms are often accused of selective application and political manipulation. Powerful nations sometimes evade accountability, while weaker states are disproportionately targeted. This selectivity undermines the credibility of international frameworks and perpetuates global inequalities. Alternatively, Christian ethics calls for impartiality and justice, denouncing favouritism and the misuse of power (James 2:1-9). Churches and Christian organizations can advocate for accountability and fairness, ensuring that justice is applied consistently across all nations and contexts.

Thirdly, human rights frameworks often lack enforceability, that is, they lack the mechanisms to enforce their principles effectively. International bodies rely on state cooperation, which is frequently withheld due to political or economic interests. As a result, victims of systemic violence and oppression are left without meaningful recourse. The church, however, ought to act prophetically, standing alongside victims and holding governments accountable. Faith-based advocacy, rooted in the biblical call to speak for the voiceless (Proverbs 31:8-9), can help bridge the gap between principles and practice.

Critiques of Justice Mechanisms

Firstly, justice mechanisms can be critiqued[31] for overemphasizing retribution. Many justice systems focus heavily on punitive measures, which can perpetuate cycles of vengeance and fail to address the root causes of harm. Retributive justice often prioritizes punishment over restoration, leaving victims and communities without healing. However, restorative justice,

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Rights", in *Shaping a World of Freedoms: 75 Years of Legacy and Impact of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Nelu Burcea and Liberato C. Bautista (eds.), New York, United Nations Plaza, UNEQUAL World Research Center, 2023, pp. 205-221.

31   See Matthew T. Martens, *Reforming Criminal Justice: A Christian Proposal*, Wheaton, IL, Crossway, 2023.

grounded in biblical principles, emphasizes reconciliation and the healing of relationships. By fostering repentance, forgiveness, and restitution, this approach aligns with the biblical vision of justice as restorative and relational (Micah 6:8).

Secondly, justice mechanisms are designed and often focused on addressing individual wrongdoing. Consequently, this results in neglect of structural injustice. As such, justice mechanisms often ignore systemic issues that perpetuate violence and inequality. This narrow focus can limit their effectiveness in creating lasting change. Christian theology, however, critiques structural sin and calls for systemic transformation. The prophetic tradition in Scripture (e.g., Isaiah 58:6-7) and Jesus' ministry to the marginalized (Luke 4:18-19) challenge Christians to address systemic injustice alongside individual accountability.

Thirdly, standardized justice mechanisms can be accused of *insensitivity to cultural contexts* as they sometimes fail to account for cultural and contextual nuances. This leads to solutions that are ineffective or even counterproductive. The contextual nature of the Gospel, however, invites culturally sensitive approaches to justice. By integrating local wisdom and practices with biblical principles, Christians can develop justice mechanisms that resonate with specific communities.

Critiques of Theological Stances

Firstly, in some cases, theological stances in addressing violence and injustice are undermined by a tendency to overly spiritualize violence and injustice, focusing exclusively on individual salvation while neglecting systemic issues. This dualism can hinder efforts to address structural evils. A holistic theology, however, integrates personal and systemic transformation. The Gospel addresses both the salvation of individuals and the renewal of societies, embodying God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

Secondly, history shows that the church has, at times, been complicit in perpetuating and even devising systems of violence and injustice. Examples range from the endorsement of colonialism to perpetuating racism and patriarchy. This complicity undermines the credibility of Christian engagement with justice. The church must, therefore, engage in self-reflection and repentance, acknowledging past failures and recommitting to the biblical mandate for justice and equity. By modelling humility and transformation, the church can restore its witness as an agent of God's justice.

Thirdly, the emphasis in Christian theology on mercy and forgiveness is sometimes perceived as an alternative to real accountability. In other words, there can be a tension (real or imagined) between mercy and justice that creates challenges in addressing severe crimes or systemic violence. Yet, the cross of Christ demonstrates the harmony of justice and mercy, satisfying the demands of accountability while extending grace. This theological foundation calls for justice that holds wrongdoing accountable while creating space for repentance and reconciliation.

The Chrstian Alternative – A Proposal

In a world fractured by violence and injustice, Christians are called to offer a transformative response that embodies the justice, mercy, and hope of God's kingdom. A Christian way forward involves a holistic approach that addresses the root causes of violence, critiques systemic oppression, and fosters reconciliation and restoration. By drawing on theological principles and engaging with practical realities, Christians can contribute to a more just and peaceful world. As described below, this may involve changes in our thinking and doing.

Grounding Justice in the Character of God

The foundation of a Christian way forward is the character of God, who is both just and merciful. Justice, as revealed in Scripture, is deeply relational and restorative, seeking to repair the harm caused by sin and to establish right relationships. The prophetic call to "let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24) reflects God's desire for justice that uplifts the oppressed and heals broken communities. Christians are invited to reflect God's character in their engagement with violence and injustice. This means pursuing justice that is neither retributive nor complacent but is rooted in love and the redemptive purposes of God.

Embracing a Holistic Vision of Justice

A Christian response to violence must go beyond addressing individual wrongs to encompass systemic and structural transformation. This holistic vision of justice includes:

- *Personal Transformation* – encouraging repentance, forgiveness, and the renewal of relationships through the power of the Gospel.

- *Systemic Change* – challenging unjust systems and advocating for reforms that promote equality and dignity for all people.
- *Community Restoration* – building inclusive communities that reflect the biblical vision of *shalom*, which is a state of flourishing and peace springing out of one's participation in the covenantal relationship with the Creator depicted in the Bible.

By integrating these dimensions, Christians can work toward justice that reflects the fullness of God's kingdom.

Centering the Marginalized

The ministry of Jesus consistently prioritized the marginalized, from the poor and oppressed to those excluded by societal norms. A Christian way forward must follow this example, centering the voices and experiences of those most affected by violence and injustice. Proverbs 31:8-9 exhorts believers to "speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves" and to "defend the rights of the poor and needy." Practical steps may include: (1) listening to the stories and perspectives of marginalized communities; (2) advocating for policies that address systemic inequities; and (3) empowering local leadership and initiatives that promote justice and reconciliation.

Practicing Reconciliation and Forgiveness

Reconciliation lies at the heart of the Christian vision for justice. Through Christ, humanity is reconciled to God and called to pursue reconciliation with one another (2 Corinthians 5:18). This involves not only addressing past wrongs but also fostering environments where trust and healing can flourish. Forgiveness, though often challenging, is a vital aspect of reconciliation. It breaks the cycle of vengeance and opens the door to restoration. However, forgiveness does not negate accountability; rather, it works alongside justice to rebuild relationships and communities.

Engaging in Nonviolent Resistance

Nonviolence is a hallmark of Christian discipleship, reflecting the life and teachings of Jesus, who resisted oppression without resorting to violence. Nonviolent resistance challenges systems of injustice while embodying the values of God's kingdom. Practical expressions of nonviolence may include:

(1) advocacy for peacebuilding initiatives; (2) participation in movements for social justice that reject violence as a means to an end; and (3) modelling love and humility in confronting injustice.

Building Bridges and Cultivating Hope

In a polarized and divided world, Christians are called to be peacemakers, fostering dialogue and understanding across cultural, religious, and political boundaries. The Gospel's vision of unity in Christ (Galatians 3:28) challenges divisions and calls for a commitment to mutual respect and collaboration. Bridge-building efforts might involve: (1) interfaith dialogue that seeks common ground on issues of justice and peace; (2) cross-cultural partnerships that amplify marginalized voices; and (3) facilitating conversations that promote reconciliation in divided communities.

Simultaneously, cultivating hope rooted in God's promises sustains action and inspires perseverance. The eschatological vision of a new heaven and new earth (Revelation 21:1-4) reminds Christians that ultimate justice and peace are assured in God's plan. This hope empowers resilience, enabling Christians to remain steadfast in their commitment to justice and to recognize every act of justice and mercy as reflecting God's kingdom.

Leveraging the Global Church

The global church is a powerful network that can mobilize resources, advocacy, and prayer in the pursuit of justice. By working together, Christians from diverse contexts can address both local and global challenges.[32] The global church can, in the least: (1) share resources and strategies for addressing violence and injustice; (2) advocate collectively for systemic changes at international levels; and (3) demonstrate the unity of the body of Christ as a witness to the world.

A Christian way forward calls for a multifaceted response to violence and injustice, grounded in God's character and guided by the teachings of Scripture. By embracing a holistic vision of justice, centering the marginalized, practicing reconciliation, and engaging in nonviolent resistance, Christians can offer a transformative witness in a fractured world. Through hope, resilience, and collaboration, the church can embody God's kingdom,

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32   See Ioan-Gheorghe Rotaru, "Globalization and its effect on religion", *Jurnalul Libertății de Conștiință* 1 (2014), pp.532-541.

pointing to the ultimate justice and peace that only God can bring. This redemptive mission invites every believer to participate in the work of justice, reflecting God's love and mercy in a world desperate for healing.

Conclusion

This paper has explored the relationship between human rights, justice, and Christian theology in addressing violence and injustice. It has demonstrated how Christian theology provides a holistic framework, rooted in the *imago Dei*, to affirm human dignity and guide responses to injustice. Principles like *mishpat* (justice), *shalom* (holistic peace and flourishing), and reconciliation offer redemptive alternatives to punitive approaches, promoting restoration and healing. The study analysed various forms of violence −political, gender-based, structural, and state-sponsored − and traced their roots to sin, systemic evil, and broken relationships. It critiqued the limitations of existing justice mechanisms and international frameworks, pointing out enforcement gaps and cultural biases. By integrating theological reflection, the paper proposed restorative and transformative alternatives centered on reconciliation and systemic change.

The paper also issued a call to center the marginalized, pursue reconciliation, and engage in nonviolent resistance reflects a distinctly Christian approach that challenges and enriches global justice efforts. Christians are persuaded to embody God's character and actively participate in His mission of justice and healing. This involves pursuing holistic justice, advocating for the oppressed, and fostering reconciliation. Through nonviolent resistance, engaging with international frameworks, and collaborating as a global church, Christians can reflect God's kingdom on earth. Grounded in the biblical vision of *shalom* and inspired by eschatological hope, Christians are invited to be co-labourers in God's mission. Each act of justice reflects God's heart and contributes to the healing of the world. By stepping into this calling, the church becomes a beacon of hope, embodying God's justice and mercy in a broken and violent world.

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