

Ellen White on Natural Law, Natural Rights, and Social Justice

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Ellen White's opposition to fugitive slave laws, her support of the abolition of slavery, as well as her promotion of prohibition and temperance legislation is well known. What is less explored is her underlying philosophy of law and rights, and how this philosophy guided her actions in relation to social reform movements. This paper explores the thought of Ellen White in relation to her view of natural law and civil rights, and how it helped guide her social activism.

I. Ellen White, Natural Duties, and Civil Rights

A. The Correlative Relationship of Rights and Duties

An understanding of natural law existed for many centuries without a very robust conception of natural individual rights. Indeed, certain conceptions of the natural law worked against conceptions of individual freedom and autonomy. The natural law as understood in the Middle-Ages created obligations, rather than personal rights, as we think of them. The put it rather crudely, but not erroneously, the only real right you might have had would be to carry out your obligation, or duty, under the natural law. The church hierarchy and the civil aristocracy were there to tell you what your duties—civil and religious—were. The only real rights in the system were the authorities' "rights" to your appropriate obedience and behavior.

But with the growth of Protestantism, and the recognition that the first table of the Decalogue created duties owed to God alone, a pattern began to develop that

the state should not interfere with or define these vertical duties. As they were a duty that existed between God and the individual, the individual had a right *not* to be interfered with by the state in the exercise of that duty. In a sense, the right against the state grew out of the individual's duty towards God.

These duties to God, and the corresponding rights against the state, arose from the basic image of God in humanity. This image included reasoning and moral faculties, that could be used to discern right and wrong, and act on it. All who were human had these faculties, and thus were owed deference by others, including the state, to worship God in the way they were convicted. The universality of human nature, made in the image of God, guaranteed the existence of this right, though not always its recognition and protection.

B. Ellen White, Human Dignity, and Civil Rights

This universal human nature, with its innate duties to God and corresponding rights as against others, was also how Ellen White thought about fundamental human rights. In commenting on the apostle Paul's comments that all humans come from "one blood," she wrote, "in that age when human rights were often unrecognized, Paul declared that God 'made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth.' All are on an equality, and to the Creator every human being owes supreme allegiance."¹

Note White's emphasis on the "supreme allegiance," or duty, that all people owe to the Creator. This duty to God becomes the basis, in her view, of our rights towards or against others. As she elsewhere stated, "you belong to God, soul, body,

¹ (TT 126.4)

and spirit. Your mind belongs to God, and your talents belong to Him also. No one has a right to control another's mind and judge for another, prescribing what is his *duty*. There are certain *rights* that belong to every individual in doing God's service. No man has any more liberty to take these *rights* from us than to take life itself."²

White understood the American system of civil and religious liberties to be built on this foundation of correlative rights, anchored in the ultimate right of the individual towards God. She stated that many of the early travelers to America were those that sought to "establish a government upon the broad foundation of civil and religious liberty. Their views found place in the Declaration of Independence, which sets forth the great truth that 'all men are created equal' and endowed with the inalienable right to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.'"³

She quoted approvingly a Congressional document that tied these rights to the idea of the ultimate duty of humanity to God. "'The framers of the Constitution recognized the eternal principle that man's relation with his God is above human legislation, and his rights of conscience inalienable. . . . They felt that their duty to God was superior to human enactments, and that man could exercise no authority over their consciences.' Congress. Docs. (USA), serial No. 200, document No. 271."⁴

C. Rights, Duties, and the Moral Law.

If rights flowed from one's duty to God, it is a kind of nonsense to talk about a right to violate the civil moral laws of God, as described in the second table of the Decalogue. As White put it, "when the divine law is set aside, the greatest misery

² (Lt 92, 1895)

³ (GC 441.1)

⁴ (GC 295.3)

will result, both to families and to society.” The French Revolution gave an example of “the results which have followed a disregard of God’s law,—dishonesty, theft, licentiousness, drunkenness, and murder”—all second table commands.⁵

“Infidel France once tried the experiment,” White wrote, “of rejecting the authority of God. What scenes of horror followed! Men cast aside the divine law as a yoke of bondage, and in their boasted liberty they placed themselves under the rule of the veriest tyrant. Anarchy and bloodshed ruled that terrible day. It was then demonstrated to the world that the surest way to undermine the foundation of order and government, is to set at naught the law of God.”⁶

The claim to be free from civil enforcement of God’s laws as found on the second table is not a claim of liberty, but of licentiousness. Such lawbreakers “put on swaggering airs, and boast of *liberty* when they are the slaves to selfishness, debased appetite, and *licentiousness*.”⁷ With other Protestant natural law thinkers of her day, White clearly saw the appropriateness of the civil enforcement of those standards and values found on the second table.

II. Ellen White and Social Justice⁸

Ellen White’s commitment to a system of duties and rights was practically seen in the causes she espoused in her life. Obviously, her great and over-riding

⁵ (SD 54.3)

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ (Temperance, 274) (emphasis added)

⁸ Ellen White did not apparently use in her writings the phrase “social justice,” which was a phrase just being newly coined in her day. But she did use the term “social rights,” which she said were possessed by everyone, and she expressed a support for social and economic equality of opportunity that we today associate with the idea of “social justice.” (GW 123); (RH April 16, 1908, par. 3); (PP 534-536).

cause was the spread of the gospel and the good news of Christ's second coming. She did, however, recognize the role Christians should play in seeking the advancement of the principles of the kingdom of God in this world, even as they waited for the glorious kingdom of God to break into reality.

She certainly knew that the so-called social gospel could be a trap for those seeking a theocracy on this earth, and she warned against this extreme. She wrote:

The government under which Jesus lived was corrupt and oppressive; on every hand were crying abuses—extortion, intolerance, and grinding cruelty. Yet the Savior attempted no civil reforms. He attacked no national abuses, nor condemned the national enemies. He did not interfere with the authority or administration of those in power. He who was our example kept aloof from earthly governments.⁹

But she also knew that in our democratic, modern world, that Christians had duties as citizens that did not exist in first-century Palestine. She believed that Christians should work on behalf of justice through the political process, as they were given opportunity. Indeed, she viewed it as a duty to do so. As she put it:

In our favored land, every voter has some voice in determining what laws shall control the nation. Should not that influence and that vote be cast on the side of temperance and virtue? . . . The advocates of temperance fail to do their whole duty unless they exert their influence by precept and example—by voice and pen and vote—in favor of prohibition and total abstinence.¹⁰

Christians have a duty, White asserted, to be concerned for the rights of all. "The Lord Jesus demands our acknowledgement of the rights of every man. Men's

⁹ (AG 16.2)

¹⁰ (R&H, Nov 8, 1881).

social rights, and their rights as Christians, are to be taken into consideration.”¹¹ In pursuing this philosophy, White herself was involved in a number of causes relating to law and justice in her own day, including anti-slavery, pro-temperance, and pro-family efforts. These causes, more fully discussed below, help illuminate the practical application of the philosophy of law, rights, and duties discussed above.

A. Fugitive Slaves, Abolition, and Freedom

One of White’s earliest social causes was that of defending the escaped slave and seeking the abolition of slavery as an institution. “The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master,” she wrote, “we are not to obey.”¹² And why did this law deserve to be ignored? Because the black man’s duty to God was superior to his duty to any human master, he thus had rights against being dominated by any human, and the runaway slave law was inherently unjust, and thus no law.

As White put it, “the slave is not the property of any man. God is his rightful master, and man has no right to take God’s workmanship into his hands, and claim him as his own.” Any human law to the contrary, because it violates the eternal law, as revealed in the natural and divine law, was really no law. “When the laws of men conflict with the Word and law of God,” White wrote, “we are to obey the latter, whatever the consequences may be.”¹³

Based on this same reasoning, not only was the fugitive slave law invalid, but the whole system of racial slavery, according to White, was wrong and sinful. Near the start of the American Civil War, she left no doubt as to God’s view of the

¹¹ (GW 123)

¹² (TC1, 201-202).

¹³ (Ibid.)

sinfulness of the institution of slavery. It was, she asserted, a “high crime” and a “sin,” not just to those who carried it out, but also to those who tolerated it. “God is punishing this nation,” she declared, “for the high crime of slavery. . . . He will punish the South for the sin of slavery, and the North for so long suffering its overreaching and overbearing influence.¹⁴

Here is seen White understanding of the relationship of God’s Eternal and Natural laws, and human laws. While the Bible regulated certain forms of economic and serfdom slavery, it made no direct mention of racial slavery, which was not known as such in the ancient near east. The racial slavery of the modern west violated certain implicit biblical principles, especially against the brotherhood of man. But it required a kind of natural law reasoning to extend these biblical principles into an absolute prohibition on chattel slavery. Still, White did not hesitate to call the violation of these natural principles a sin against God and humanity.

B. Freed Slaves, Poorer Classes, and Economic Justice

Slavery is now, of course, illegal, and many would say that White’s moral crusade on this point is purely a matter of historical interest. But her writings make clear that freedom from bondage was only the first step in righting the wrongs of slavery and discrimination. Speaking of the newly freed blacks in the South, she said that the Lord demanded “restitution” from American Christians to “relieve the

¹⁴ (TC1, 264)

necessities of this field. . . . The Lord calls upon you to restore to His people the advantages of which they have so long been denied.”¹⁵

These sentiments apply not just to people previously held in bondage, but to poorer and marginalized classes generally. White spoke approvingly of the Old Testament system of gleanings, offerings, and jubilees that made provision for the care of the necessities of the poor, the freeing of slaves, and the regular redistribution of property—the means of production in ancient Israel—throughout society. Such legal social welfare provisions were necessary, she wrote, because:

*without some restraint the power of the wealthy would become a monopoly, and the poor, though in every respect fully as worthy in God’s sight, would be regarded and treated as inferior to their more prosperous brethren. . . . The regulations that God established were designed to promote social equality.*¹⁶

Some are quick to argue that such social and economic legislation was only appropriate for the theocracy of ancient Israel. But White noted that such economic regulations were based on principles of the natural law, which she identified as the “law of mutual dependence.” This law recognizes that “the poor are not more dependent upon the rich than are the rich upon the poor. While the one class ask a share in the blessings which God has bestowed upon their wealthier neighbors, the other need the faithful service, the strength of brain and bone and muscle, that are the capital of the poor.”¹⁷

¹⁵ (SWk 155)

¹⁶ (PP 534)

¹⁷ Ibid.

She acknowledged that there was no right that “all men should have an equal share in the temporal blessings of God.” Such a “right” would ignore the need for effort and character building provided by a system of reward for effort. Yet those who are materially successful must “regard themselves merely as stewards of His goods, as entrusted with means to be employed for the benefit of the suffering and the needy.”¹⁸ This status of “stewardship” is not one that White viewed as purely voluntary.

On the contrary, she wrote that the principles of the economic laws of ancient Israel, if applied today, “would prevent the terrible evils that in all ages have resulted from the oppression of the rich toward the poor and the suspicion and hatred of the poor toward the rich.” Such laws “might hinder the amassing of great wealth and the indulgence of unbounded luxury,” but “they would prevent the consequent ignorance and degradation of tens of thousands.”

In words especially relevant to today, when the cities of America are filled with angry protestors and the flickering of burning buildings, White said such laws would “bring a peaceful solution of those problems that now threaten to fill the world with anarchy and bloodshed.”¹⁹

C. Rights and Duties in Domestic and Family Life

White saw this correlative system of rights and duties not only operating in the political sphere, but also in the domestic. Social justice included the rights and duties of the home life. Indeed, this might be viewed as the paramount place for it. She placed a greater emphasis on the rights and duties of the family as a unit, than

¹⁸ (PP 535)

¹⁹ (PP 536.2)

on the rights of individual members standing alone. Take her view of the burgeoning women's rights movement of her day, which sought to obtain the vote for women.

1. Rights of Wives and Mothers

In relation to movement for women's suffrage, White refused involvement. She commented, "there are speculations as to woman's rights, and her duty in regard to voting; but many women have had no discipline which would qualify them to understand the bearing of important questions. They have lived a life of fashion and self-gratification."²⁰

White did not deny that a right to vote might exist, but it could and should only be pursued should women develop themselves so as to be able to bear the duties that came with political involvement. As she put it, "women who might develop a good intellect, who might perfect a noble character, are mere slaves to custom. They lack breadth of thought and intellectual culture. . . . They are not prepared to act wisely in political matters."²¹

White was much more interested in the rights that women had in connection to their duties in the family unit as wives and mothers. These were not speculative, hypothetical, or far-off duties, but ones that almost all women faced on a daily basis. As she put it, the so-called women's rights advocates "may talk of woman's elevated sphere and of her rights, while they themselves sink far below the true sphere of woman."²²

²⁰ (CTBH 159.4).

²¹ Ibid.

²² (HR June 1, 1873, par. 7).

Such women had “rights” to be educated and trained to carry out those immediate and obvious duties. “It is the *right* of every daughter of Eve” White wrote, “in our land to be thoroughly educated in household duties, having a knowledge of all the branches of practical life in domestic labor. . . . It is woman’s *right* to be qualified to direct the expanding minds of her children. It is her *right* to have an understanding of her own and her children’s organisms, that she may know how to treat her children”²³

It should be noted that Ellen White did not *deny* that there might be a right for women to vote, and that if they obtained the appropriate education, they should be able to exercise it. Further, while not taking a position on the ordination of women, White warned that asking women to do ministerial work as a vocation, without pay, is not only unfair—“exaction,” “partiality,” “selfishness,” and “robbery”—but would “discourage our sisters from qualifying themselves for the work they should engage in.”²⁴ She also asserted that women ministers should be paid from the tithe, which she elsewhere maintained is to be sacredly reserved for the support of the gospel ministry.²⁵ “The tithe should go to those who labor in word and doctrine, be they men or women,” she stated.²⁶

Whatever your position on ordination, we must recognize that if God has gifted women for ministry, and they have fulfilled their obligation in preparing themselves, that they have a right to carry that ministry out, and God will hold us accountable as robbers if we do not support them.

²³ (Ibid.) (emphasis added).

²⁴ (GW 452-453; Ev 492).

²⁵ (CS 81, 101-103; 9T 247-250).

²⁶ (Ev 492).

2. Husbands, Fathers, and Prohibition

Husbands and fathers also had duties towards the family, which he owed before both God and society. Among these are providing material and physical support, as well as emotional and social affection. Activities and commercial services that interfered with the performance of these duties could be regulated and even banned by the state. This was why White wrote, and acted, so strongly against the sale of alcohol.

“The home of a drunkard,” she wrote, “tells the sad story of the evil wrought by the use of strong drink. Wretchedness and destitution reign, and often the wife and children suffer from cold and hunger.” But despite of this invasion of the family unit, “the liquor traffic is legalized. Heaven sees it all. God keeps a record of the men robbed of their reason, and the homes made wretched, by the use of alcohol.”²⁷

This “robbery” of reason and the peace and safety of the home would bring judgment, White declared, not just on the drunkard himself, but also on those that passed and supported laws for the sale of the destructive product. “In that great day when every man will be judged according to the deeds done in the body, what will those who have legalized the liquor traffic say in excuse for allowing these places of death to be kept open?”²⁸ For these reasons, Ellen White involved herself in the nation-wide movement for laws prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol. She went as far as preaching that Adventists should go and vote for such laws and those supporting them, even if the elections were held on Sabbath.²⁹

²⁷ (RH June 15, 1905, par. 15)

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ (3 BIO 159)

3. Other Family Issues – Marriage and Divorce

The state appropriately protected, in White's view, these moral standards of family structure. Ellen White approvingly quoted Sir Walter Scott's description of the introduction of no-fault divorce into revolutionary France:

If fiends had set themselves to work to discover a mode of most effectually destroying whatever is venerable, graceful, or permanent in domestic life . . . they could not have invented a more effectual plan than the degradation of marriage.³⁰

In her mind, the domestic relations, including marriage, were relations of the second table that the state should cultivate and protect. Legal efforts to loosen the rights and duties of domestic life, and to make marriage more easily separable and less permanent, were threats to society itself.

One need hardly wonder what White would have thought of same-sex marriage. In regards to the relatively tamer move to no-fault divorce in 18th century France, she included a quote in the *Great Controversy* from a famous French actress who quipped that the new marriage law was the "sacrament of adultery."³¹ Given White's view of the "Sodomitish practices which brought the judgment of God upon the world," she might well agree that the acceptance of gay marriage in our societies is the installation of the sacrament of sodomy.

While God and the civil state allow a certain freedom for people to choose moral wrongs, there is no natural "right" to participate in such wrongs. Under the framework of rights and duties outlined above, one can understand that the state should give freedom to allow consenting adults to engage in sexual behaviors that

³⁰ (GC 270.1)

³¹ Ibid.

do not impact others. Decriminalizing homosexual behavior in civil society is consistent with the freedom that God gives humanity to make moral choices.

But that is a far cry from insisting that alternate sexual units have some “right” to demand from the state and all other citizens full recognition and support of this behavior as a positive public good, and as a place to raise children, which such unions have no hope in producing left to their own devices. It is hard to argue that you have a “natural right” to something that nature itself denies you, as either a right or a duty.

This logic about natural and transcendent duties and correlative rights may no longer be understood in the civil societies outside the church. But it is an argument we still must make, as it is a last witness to the truth and moral nature of God to a society rapidly losing its moral bearing. And of course, we must continue to keep this understanding alive within our church and its institutions. If not, we will face an increasing disconnect between our biblical teachings, and our own member’s and young people’s sense of natural justice, which is easily shaped by the standards of our society and culture.

It is no surprise that our prophet, more than a 100 years ago, saw the importance of calling us to the great moral truths of natural rights and duties. We should echo her call, both to the church and to the world around us.