

## CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

### Freedom and Responsibility: A Search for Harmony— Human Rights and Personal Dignity

**Patriarch Kirill of Moscow**

London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2011 (136 pages)

*Freedom and Responsibility* is a collection of fourteen addresses and articles by Patriarch Kirill of Moscow, most written when he was head of the Russian Orthodox Church's Department of External Church Relations (DECR). In addition, this slim volume also includes as an appendix, "The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom, and Rights," developed by the DECR and adopted by the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church in 2008. The goal of the book is to articulate an Orthodox Christian perspective on human rights and dignity, freedom, and responsibility, *vis-à-vis* the Western, secular humanist concepts that currently form the basis of much international law.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition does not enjoy the luxury of drawing on 120 years of authoritative papal social encyclicals as does the Roman Catholic Church. This, of course, is not to say that the East has been utterly silent, but the average Orthodox Christian, especially in the Anglophone world, has had little official guidance preceding the publication of *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* by the DECR in 2000. Thus this book is a welcome contribution to an ever clearer and more coherent articulation of Orthodox Christian Social thought.

His Holiness narrates the problem as follows:

The age of the Enlightenment declared man to be the center of the universe. This man was viewed also as sinless from birth.... And if people are indeed born immaculate, it is only right and proper that they be given full freedom to realise their human potential. Hence the idea of the absolute value of human rights and liberties that has prevailed until now in Western liberal society. The French Revolution mainstreamed this political paradigm, from whence it determined the political thought of the European nations and in the twentieth century went on to form the basis of international organisations (52).

Not to be misunderstood, he adds, “I too am convinced of the need to protect human rights and freedoms. But I am also convinced that human beings are not born sinless” (52). In his view, this fundamental dissonance between Enlightenment and traditional Christian anthropology is responsible for much social conflict today. By failing to acknowledge humanity’s tendency toward sin, which is evident from “simple observation,” advocates of the “liberal principle” that “my freedom should not restrict the freedom of another person” open the “way to destruction for our civilization” if no other restraining principle, such as universal morality, is acknowledged (55–56). The problem is that, far from being open and liberal minded, advocates of amoral freedom and rights often censure anyone with any other perspective; it is their view that “all other traditions should be silent and submit” (66, cf. 77–78).

In opposition to the dominant paradigm, the Patriarch advocates what he terms a *multi-polar* world (cf. 38, 60, 65, 73, 78, 91–92). The concept of human rights as we know it today, he writes,

was generated and developed in Western countries, with their unique historical and cultural destiny.... But does this mean that Western standards of happiness are applicable to all countries and cultures? Other civilizations also have their positive experience of social life. Why is it that they are not entitled to speak their mind? Of course they have such a right. This is the right of every people (60).

A truly liberal, multi-polar world would accurately represent not only the interests of secular humanists but also the adherents of all major world religions and cultures as well. “In my view,” writes Kirill,

it is wrong and even dangerous when people attempt to embrace the entire vast variety of God’s world with a small number of ideas formulated in the Western European philosophical and political context, without the meaningful participation of Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus and Orthodox Christians, and of Catholics as well. Indeed, the large majority of the world’s population, with their ancient and native cultures, has never participated meaningfully in the development of this value system, which people want to set up as a universal standard, at times even by force (78).

Instead, international lawmakers need to acknowledge the “important fact that in the Decalogue all main world religions are in accord with each other in their definition of

good and evil” (64) and augment their concepts of human rights and liberty with the universally acknowledged standard of morality, that is, natural law (26), to which the consciences of all bear witness.

This leads him to advocate a balance between freedom in the private and public spheres:

In the private sphere, the freedom of moral choice should be as complete as possible. Here a person can make a moral choice at his or her own discretion, even act in a way that is contrary to public morality.... The only things that can be limited in the private sphere are moral choices that can cause injury to another member of society. However, in the public sphere of any state only those values shared by a majority of the people should be allowed to be disseminated and receive public support (102).

For example, while homosexual activity ought not to be made illegal (65), neither should it receive state sanction (e.g., by legalizing same-sex marriage) contrary to the moral values of the majority. California’s democratically approved Proposition 8, banning same-sex marriage, which was recently reversed by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals (my example, not Kirill’s), might be a prime example of how “[t]he withdrawal of society and State from supporting traditional moral norms has resulted in society confronting situations in which the religious feelings of major groups are offended” (90). Instead, what is needed is moral legislation, education, and media (68–69).

I would only offer the following criticism. The Patriarch states that “Protestantism is in essence a liberal reading of Christianity” (6). His Holiness seems to be unaware of the many conservative, confessional Protestant churches that are allies in his efforts to advocate for a view of human society that is more sensitive to traditional morality. Whether this is due to a public-relations failure on their part or incomplete research on the part of the Patriarchate I do not know.

In the end, this criticism does not detract from the goal of the book, which, with the addition of the “The Russian Orthodox Church’s Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom, and Rights” as an appendix, is a welcome contribution to Orthodox Christian social thought.

—Dylan Pahman  
*Acton Institute*

## The Two Pillars of the Market: A Paradigm for Dialogue between Theology and Economics

**Jean Lee**

Oxford, United Kingdom: Peter Lang, 2011 (293 pages)

Well-defined private property rights or contracts are the pillar of the market economy. Contrary to this presumption widely accepted among economists, Jean Lee, an assistant professor at the China Graduate School of Theology in Hong Kong, asserts that there is another pillar of the market economy not acknowledged by contemporary economists: