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Editors

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Humiliation, Degradation, Dehumanization

Human Dignity Violated

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HUMILIATION, DEGRADATION, DEHUMANIZATION

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HUMILIATION, DEGRADATION, DEHUMANIZATION

Human Dignity Violated

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Foreword

Human dignity is the main philosophical foundation of human rights, as expressed in the Charter of the United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and many other documents. The concept of human dignity is meant to distinguish human beings from other creatures, notably animals. It underlines the uniqueness of human beings among all creatures, above all their free will, individual autonomy and capability of independent decision-making based on reason and free moral choice. But philosophers disagree on how to define human dignity and, as with human rights, the concept is often regarded as a Western one not applicable to other cultures. On the other hand, with the recognition of poverty and climate change as major violations of human rights and faced with certain challenges to the uniqueness of humanity caused by modern science and technology, notably biomedicine and genetic engineering, the concept of human dignity features again more prominently in the contemporary human rights discourse.

On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Swiss Foreign Minister presented an Agenda for Human Rights entitled “Protecting Dignity” which had been drafted by a Panel of Eminent Persons from all world regions.¹ While reaffirming that “human dignity, which is inherent in all human beings, is the moral and philosophical justification for equality and other universal human rights”, the Agenda recognizes at the same time that “only certain violations of human rights constitute an attack on human dignity”. As a consequence, the Agenda “primarily aims at addressing human rights issues directly linked to human dignity”, such as poverty and climate change, migration and urbanization, armed conflicts and weapons of mass destruction, racism, genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity, terrorism and counter-terrorism, organized crime and human trafficking, inhuman prison conditions, arbitrary detention, torture and enforced disappearance.

By identifying these most serious human rights violations as attacks on human dignity, the drafters of the Swiss Agenda for Human Rights follow a similarly negative approach as the authors of the present book. By focussing on violations of human dignity, they address the question what it means for human beings all over

¹ www.UDHR60.ch.

the world to be degraded, humiliated and dehumanized. What do victims of slavery and torture, poverty and starvation, armed conflict and domestic violence, corporal and capital punishment, racism and genocide, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearance, rape and human trafficking have in common? In my opinion, it is the experience of absolute powerlessness which creates the feeling among the victims of certain gross human rights violations to have lost their dignity and humanity. As the slave holder exercises absolute power over slaves, the torturer, the rapist, the genocidaire, the trafficker exercises absolute power over their respective victims. Many victims of torture, rape, trafficking, female genital mutilation, corporal punishment and inhuman prison conditions whom I interviewed in my function as Special Rapporteur on Torture in all world regions had reached a stage in which they regarded death as a relief compared to the suffering of being further dehumanized. That is why the right to human dignity seems to be even more important than the right to life and why “ticking bombs” and similar scenarios can never be used to balance security and saving lives of individuals against human dignity.

By addressing various aspects of human dignity and ways how human beings continue to be deprived by other human beings of this essential aspect of being human, the present volume constitutes an important contribution to the contemporary inter-disciplinary discourse on the relationship between human rights and human dignity.

Vienna, January 2010

Manfred Nowak (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute
of Human Rights, University of Vienna;
U.N. Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Cruel,
Inhuman or Degrading Treatment)

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