

Thomas K. Johnson

Martin Luther King and Those Wonderful Old Names!

*The “Letter from a Birmingham Jail”
and Christian Human Rights Resources*



Pro mundis
Pro mundis

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This essay is a revised version of a speech given at the first annual International Human Rights Conference in Prague, Czech Republic, on March 7, 2019, hosted by Anglo-American University, Norwich University, and Post Bellum. Websites: Anglo-American University, <https://www.aauni.edu/>. Norwich University, <http://www.norwich.edu/>. Post Bellum, <https://www.postbellum.cz/english/>.

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The “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” and Christian Human Rights Resources!

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On Martin Luther King Day (an official U.S. holiday) I listened to an inspiring podcast. It was very informative, with generous quotations from Dr. King. The hearts of the people who organized the podcast were clearly moved by King’s speeches, such as “I Have a Dream,” and now they were digging deeply into King’s moral philosophy.² As I listened, one peculiarity caught my ear: the commentator, who spoke fluid, sophisticated English, struggled to pronounce certain old names that appear in King’s famous 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail.” The commentator seemed not to recognize biblical names such as Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Similarly, the name of Thomas Aquinas got stuck on his tongue. Yet the commentator was clearly searching; he was searching, I believe, not only for how to pronounce ancient names. Beyond that he was searching for intellectual resources that might provide new courage and direction for human rights efforts, perhaps sensing the weaknesses of today’s human rights discourse.

This commentator’s lack of familiarity with these old names represents, perhaps, many a person’s unfamiliarity with how the Judeo-Christian tradition has been fueling, really propelling, human rights thought and action for centuries. In contrast with some in our time, when Dr. King wrote his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” the intellectual manifesto of the American civil rights movement, he demonstrated a deep and wide-ranging familiarity with the primary texts of Judeo-Christian ethics. This is worthy of our attention. The way in which King appropriated these old resources provided history-changing courage and direction to the civil rights movement. It is well worth our time to explore Dr. King’s resources to see if we too can find courage and direction.³

King’s letter addresses both the political and religious spheres, never separating faith and public philosophy. It is one of the most important American political texts of the twentieth century, but it is also a deeply spiritual text, written by a Christian minister and ad-

dressed to American religious communities. It is a call for the legal and political protection of human rights, as well as a plea for spiritual renewal in the churches and synagogues. The organic relatedness of the religious and political spheres is found in the sources Dr. King used, which is one of the reasons why these sources merit our attention.

The Prophets

King's first mention of old religious sources in this letter is to the eighth-century prophets who "left their little villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns." Later he quoted the prophet Amos, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream," after asking if Amos was an extremist (as some were calling King) because of his appeal for justice.

The prophets King had in mind, from about 800 BC to about 700 BC, spoke to Israel, Judah, and the surrounding nations. Sometimes they promised God's future redemption, but King was especially thinking about how writers such as Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Micah exposed the evils of their time, what we today call human rights abuses. Amos was typical in this regard and perhaps a favorite of Dr. King. Fore-shadowing journalists of a later era, Amos described atrocities and pronounced doom on the perpetrators. For example, Amos claims:

*"This is what the Lord says: 'For three sins of Gaza, even for four, I will not relent. Because she took captive whole communities and sold them to Edom, I will send fire on the walls of Gaza that will consume her fortresses.'"*⁴

At that time, Edom was the home of slave traders. The people of Gaza were capturing "whole communities" to sell them as slaves. In the name of God, Amos predicted justice. Amos also wrote:

*"This is what the Lord says: 'For three sins of Ammon, even for four, I will not relent. Because he ripped open the pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders.'"*⁵

In a war of expansion, the people of Ammon committed unspeakable crimes. Words fail us in light of what they did. In the name of God, Amos again predicted justice.

In several such brief reports, Amos exposed the atrocities of the nations surrounding Israel and Judah. The texts make us expect the citizens of Israel and Judah to applaud such condemnations, since the people of Israel and Judah are portrayed as proud of their moral and religious superiority to the less enlightened nations. Doubtless to the horror of his audience, Amos then addressed the sins of Israel in terms that were equally as colorful and confrontational:

"This is what the Lord says: 'For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals.

They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.”⁶

The details are not clear, but obviously the powerful were oppressing and perhaps selling the poor. Since sandals were sometimes used symbolically to confirm property transactions, the abuse may have included stealing farm land from the poor, forcing the poor into greater poverty or even starvation. The valuable religious and moral identity of Israel did not restrain them from crimes against humanity.

The ancient prophets did not speak the language of political science. They did not use the terms “civil rights” or “human rights abuses” or precisely delimit state actors from non-state actors. They did not articulate a theory of democracy. They talked about people abusing people. When Dr. King exposed the sins of racial discrimination in his day, he was standing on the shoulders of the prophets, little-known people from antiquity who addressed the evils of kings, empires, and religious people in the name of God. Those prophets number among our deepest sources for developing a truly serious way of talking about human rights abuses.

There is an important but sometimes implicit ethical theme found in King and in the prophets that merits explicit mention in our era of heightened awareness of the cultural relativity of moral rules. The central moral problem addressed by Dr. King was that members of his black community, many

of whom were descendants of slaves, were not treated fairly by the majority (and wealthier) white community. His people faced frequent discrimination or exclusion regarding schools, businesses, jobs, buses, restaurants, and many other social situations. Another way of describing this problem was that the white community had a clear set of moral standards for how they treated each other, but this set of moral standards was culturally limited to their own community and did not apply to other people groups, especially not to those whom they called “negroes.” Race-based discrimination was an organic part of a type of cultural moral relativism, the idea that moral rules are not binding on all human interactions, only on interactions with people within one’s own culture.⁷ A crucial assumption of the civil rights movement is that there is one set of moral rules that applies to all human interactions, regardless of the situation, race, color, or culture of the people interacting. The civil rights movement in which Dr. King was a leader was an appeal to a universal moral law, which King thought everyone should be able to recognize.

This appeal to a universal moral law was especially evident in the quotations from the prophet Amos. Amos transparently identified himself as rooted in Jewish religion and culture, but he spoke to people from multiple other religions and cultures (such as Ammon and Gaza) about how they treated people from still other cultures and religions. He appealed to a universal moral

law that should apply to all human interactions and which all should be able to recognize regardless of their culture and beliefs. The appeal to a universal moral law which King appropriated was part of the Judeo-Christian moral tradition, but it was far more than an appropriation of a particular religious tradition. It was a claim that regardless of religion, culture, or tradition, all people know much about right and wrong, including knowing that racism and segregation are morally wrong.

There are some themes in the ancient prophets which I find profoundly disturbing. First, the prophets wrote as if the people committing the atrocities knew that their actions were horribly wrong. A lack of moral information was not the problem! According to Amos, the people in power knew such actions to be wrong, and yet they destroyed people: this is frightening.

Second, although the prophets spoke in the name of the God of Israel, they did not hesitate to condemn the sins of those who claimed to follow the God of Israel. They unveiled the inhumanity of everyone they addressed, regardless of religion. If anything, they aimed their sharpest criticisms at the very people who professed allegiance to their God. The people who claimed to know the most religiously were held to a higher standard.

Regardless of our religious and cultural identities, these are convictions from the ancient prophets which should throb at the heart of the human rights movement: All cultures can commit

atrocities; people generally know the difference between right and wrong, even while committing atrocities; religion does not always prevent human rights abuses.

The Jewish Diaspora in Exile

Not many people mention Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego when discussing human rights. Who were these people? Why did Dr. King think this old story was so important for the civil rights movement?

These three bright Jewish boys appear in the Old Testament book of Daniel. They were taken as captives with Daniel from Jerusalem to Babylon in the sixth century BCE and were trained as civil servants. Contrary to their captors' expectations, these young men maintained their Jewish identity, initially in a non-confrontational way. When their guard asked them to eat the rich food and wine of the palace, they did not reply, "Your food is an abomination to God;" they calmly asked permission to demonstrate that they would be healthier if they followed their Jewish food laws.

Their relation with the Babylonian state changed dramatically when King Nebuchadnezzar ordered all public servants to worship a newly erected idol. The three refused. Knowing they were at risk of death, they told the king, "Your Majesty, we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you

have set up” (Daniel 3:18). This enraged Nebuchadnezzar, who threw them into a fiery furnace. To everyone’s surprise, they survived.

As an historian of ethics, it interests me to see which dimensions of this story King did not use to explain his activism. King did not talk about the relations between minority and majority religions faced by his ancient heroes, though his minority African-American Christianity had conflicts with the majority religions in America. King was gravely disappointed that white churches and synagogues did not rush to support the civil rights movement, but King did not relate his three ancient Jewish heroes to the problems of relations between majority and minority religions.

It also interests me that King did not use the “beastly empire” theme to support his efforts. The account of his Jewish heroes is found in texts scholars call “apocalyptic literature.” In this literature several empires are described as devouring beasts, whether a lion, a bear, or a leopard, which destroy everything in their path. In view of the atrocities committed by the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, such descriptions make sense. But Dr. King did not appropriate the beast theme for the civil rights movement; perhaps he had higher hopes for what would come from the American federal government.

Why did Dr. King cite Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego? To legitimate carefully defined civil disobedience. For us in a post-Velvet Revolution society,

it may be hard to grasp how deeply American civil rights leaders of the 1960s struggled to justify civil disobedience. They belonged to a community that viewed obeying the law as a binding moral obligation. An authoritative precedent was needed to modify this obligation. Following is a passage from the letter of April 12, 1963, signed by prominent Christian leaders and one rabbi from Birmingham, to which King was responding in his more famous letter:

“We clergymen are among those who, in January, issued ‘an Appeal for Law and Order and Common Sense,’ in dealing with racial problems in Alabama. We expressed understanding that honest convictions in racial matters could properly be pursued in the courts, but urged that decisions of those courts should in the meantime be peacefully obeyed. . . . However, we are now confronted by a series of demonstrations by some of our Negro citizens, directed and led in part by outsiders. We recognize the natural impatience of people who feel their hopes are slow in being realized. But we are convinced that these demonstrations are unwise and untimely. . . . We further strongly urge our own Negro community to withdraw support from these demonstrations.”⁸

King penned his famous letter in response to this criticism while sitting in jail for leading a demonstration without a legal parade permit. According to the laws of the city of Birmingham,

he was a criminal. Did his crime not discredit his cause and the entire civil rights movement? He answered that we are not morally obligated to obey unjust laws; indeed, sometimes we are morally required to disobey unjust laws.

“You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court’s decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask, ‘How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?’ The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: there are just laws, and there are unjust laws.”

In this context he cites the example of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. “There is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved.”

These three are heroes precisely because they risked their lives to disobey an unjust law in order to obey a higher law. By citing these old names, King was not only defending his principles of non-violent civil disobedience; he was also challenging his Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic religious opponents to follow their own principles. He challenged them to find the religious courage to disobey unjust laws and follow a higher law as that law is found in their

scriptures and in conscience. The civil disobedience of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego was sublime, making them King’s ideal religious role models as defenders of human dignity.

Thomas Aquinas and the Higher Moral Law

Dr. King defended principled civil disobedience by citing his three Jewish heroes, but how can one distinguish between just and unjust laws? He continued to believe that obedience to just laws is morally required; morally legitimate civil disobedience requires a principled way to explain why and in what way a law is unjust. To address this question, King turned to the great Christian philosopher, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). King wrote:

“How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust.”

In his *Treatise on Law*,² Thomas Aquinas identified four types of laws: (1) the eternal law which exists in the reason or mind of God; (2) the natural law, which is the reflection or image of the eternal law within human reason by

creation; (3) the divine law, which is the special revelation of God in the Bible; and (4) human law, the fallible rules that are written and enforced in every society.¹⁰ Thomas said that this last category, human law, could be just or unjust. “The ordinances human beings enact may be just or unjust. If they are just, then we have a moral obligation to obey them, since they ultimately derive from the eternal law of God. . . . An ordinance may be unjust for one of two reasons: first, it may be contrary to the rights of humanity; and second, it may be contrary to the rights of God.”¹¹

Therefore, Thomas concluded, we have no strict moral obligation to obey unjust laws, those laws which are contrary to human rights, though prudence calls for great caution before we disobey a human law. Moreover, in some situations people have a moral obligation to disobey an unjust law, which means engaging in civil disobedience. For King following Thomas, human rights activism requires determining when a law is so seriously unjust that responsible people should disobey an unjust law in order to obey a higher moral law.

Dr. King set his civil disobedience of the 1960s in the context of the heroes of Western civilization from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, people who had disobeyed unjust human laws in order to obey higher laws. “We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was ‘legal’ and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was ‘illegal.’ It was ‘illegal’ to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Ger-

many. But I am sure that if I had lived in Germany during that time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal. If I lived in a Communist country today where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I believe I would openly advocate disobeying these anti-religious laws.” King believed his principles were the same as those of the anti-Nazi dissidents and of the anti-Communist dissidents.

This classical claim about civil disobedience, articulated by Aquinas and King, merits serious attention today. Responsible people must consider disobeying unjust human laws, precisely when those unjust laws are contrary to fundamental human rights. This approach does not make human laws appear to be of little importance. When a human law is just, claim Aquinas and King, all people have a God-given obligation to obey that law. The goal of civil disobedience must be to establish a just human law which protects human rights and is compatible with the higher moral law.

Dr. King did not quote unpronounceable ancient names when he mentioned the example of the early Christian church as a source of his civil disobedience on behalf of human rights. Nevertheless, the Christians of the first centuries were a source of powerful inspiration for King; his appeals to the early church were also a call for spiritual renewal in the churches of his time. He wrote, civil disobedience “was practiced superbly by the early Chris-

tians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire.” The role model, for King, was civil disobedience to the point of death because of one’s religious and moral convictions. This willingness to suffer to the point of death was, in King’s assessment, a source of tremendous spiritual power.

“There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period that the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was the thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Wherever the early Christians entered a town, the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being ‘disturbers of the peace’ and ‘outside agitators.’ But they went on with the conviction that they were a ‘colony of heaven’ and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. . . . They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.”

King thought that renewed churches in his time could bring an end to the evil of racial discrimination, but to do so they would need to risk facing hungry lions.

Conclusion

The human rights movement is delivering less than was promised in 1948. That is why some serious souls, such as the commentator mentioned, are looking for new sources of courage and guidance in Martin Luther King, Jr. That is a good choice, since Dr. King and his principles brought vast changes in the United States and far beyond. But those principles are neither easy nor safe. Dr. King knew his principles would arouse powerful reactions and might lead to his death. Yet he exhorted his movement to risk death to overcome injustice.

To appropriate the perspective of Martin Luther King, one must not only read one or two of his texts or listen to some speeches. The direction suggested here is to also look to the sources used by Dr. King, such as the speeches of the prophets and the actions of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. And to grasp justice, one must include a theory such as that of Thomas Aquinas; otherwise we easily confuse justice and injustice. But if one is willing to take those steps, one must be careful of what might follow.



Members of the Round Table on the Roots of Human Rights, left to right: Dr. Richard Smith; Prof. Dr. Thomas K. Johnson, Prof. Dr. et Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher, and doc. Dr. Jiří Kašný.

Links to related materials
written or edited by Prof. Johnson:

Thomas K. Johnson, *Human Rights: A Christian Primer*, 2nd ed. (Bonn: World Evangelical Alliance, 2016), available here: https://www.academia.edu/36884876/Human_Rights_A_Christian_Primer.

Thomas K. Johnson, ed., with Thomas Schirrmacher and Christof Sauer, *Global Declarations on Freedom of Religion or Belief and Human Rights* (Bonn: World Evangelical Alliance, 2017), available here: https://www.academia.edu/36886097/Global_Declarations_on_Freedom_of_Religion_or_Belief_and_Human_Rights.

Thomas K. Johnson, *Dialogue with Kierkegaard in Protestant Theology: Donald Bloesch, Francis Schaeffer, and Helmut Thielicke* (Martin Bucer Seminary, 2013), available here: https://www.academia.edu/37016028/Dialogue_with_Kierkegaard_in_Protestant_Theology_Donald_Bloesch_Francis_Schaeffer_and_Helmut_Thielicke.

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Thomas K. Johnson, *The Moral Crisis of the West: Reflections from Helmut Thielicke and Francis Schaeffer* (Martin Bucer Seminary, 2009), available here: https://www.academia.edu/37063806/The_Moral_Crisis_of_the_West_Reflections_from_Helmut_Thielicke_and_Francis_Schaeffer.

Thomas K. Johnson, *Is Human Dignity Earned or is Human Dignity a Gift? A Contribution of the Evangelical Faith to Human Rights Discourse* (Martin Bucer Seminary, 2019), available here: https://www.academia.edu/38604536/Is_Human_Dignity_Earned_or_is_Human_Dignity_a_Gift_A_Contribution_of_the_Evangelical_Faith_to_Human_Rights_Discourse.

Annotation

Anmerkungen

¹This essay is a revised version of a speech given at the first annual International Human Rights Conference in Prague, Czech Republic, on March 7, 2019, hosted by Anglo-American University, Norwich University, and Post Bellum. Websites: Anglo-American University, <https://www.aauni.edu/>. Norwich University, <http://www.norwich.edu/>. Post Bellum, <https://www.postbellum.cz/english/>.

²Martin Luther King's most famous speech, "I Have a Dream," was given during a March on Washington (DC) on August 28, 1963. A photo copy of the original text is available here: <https://www.archives.gov/files/press/exhibits/dream-speech.pdf>. A more easily quoted version of the text is here: <https://www.montgomeryschool-smd.org/uploadedFiles/schools/leems/news/Full-text-I-Have-a-Dream-.pdf> A video of the event, with subtitles, is available here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vP4iY1TtS3s>.

³The letter was dated April 16, 1963. A good text is found here: https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf. Though I am recommending the study of King's famous letter and the sources King used, this is not a complete endorsement of King as a role model. There are serious allegations that he was sexually unfaithful to his wife and that he plagiarized as a student. He did not always affirm some standard Christian beliefs, and his proposals regarding the Vietnam War may have been influenced by members of the Communist Party, USA. See Joe Carter, "9 Things You Should Know About Martin Luther King, Jr.," The Gospel Coalition, January 19, 2014. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-you-should-know-about-martin-luther-king-jr-2>.

⁴Amos 1: 6, 7 NIV.

⁵Amos 1: 13 NIV.

⁶Amos 2: 6, 7 NIV.

⁷We normally contrast moral relativism with moral absolutism (or moral universalism). Moral absolutism says there are moral rules

that apply to all people universally, regardless of race, culture, or nationality. Moral relativism claims there are no absolute moral rules, only relative moral rules. There are two main types of moral relativism, cultural relativism and individual relativism. Cultural relativism claims that right and wrong are dependent on the culture within which an action occurs, such that one culture might properly affirm racism while another culture properly rejects racism as morally wrong. Individual relativism claims that right and wrong are dependent on the individual acting, so that each person must decide for himself/herself what is right and what is wrong; if individual relativism is true, each person may properly decide if racism is good or if racism is evil.

⁸https://swap.stanford.edu/20141218230016/http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/popular_requests/frequentdocs/clergy.pdf. Signed by C.C.J. Carpenter, D.D., LL.D., *Bishop of Alabama*; Joseph A. Durick, D.D., *Auxiliary Bishop, Diocese of Mobile-Birmingham*; Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, *Temple Emanu-El, Birmingham, Alabama*; Bishop Paul Hardin, *Bishop of the Alabama-West Florida Conference of the Methodist Church*; Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, *Bishop of the North Alabama Conference of the Methodist Church*; George M. Murray, D.D., LL.D., *Bishop Coadjutor, Episcopal Diocese of Alabama*; Edward V. Ramage, *Moderator, Synod of the Alabama Presbyterian Church in the United States*; Earl Stallings, *Pastor, First Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama*.

⁹The following paragraphs about Thomas Aquinas are adapted from Thomas K. Johnson, *Human Rights: A Christian Primer*, 2nd ed., vol. 1 of The World Evangelical Alliance Global Issues Series (Bonn, 2016), pp 84, 85, available as a download: https://www.academia.edu/36884876/Human_Rights_A_Christian_Primer

¹⁰For more on how the theology and philosophy of law synthesized by St. Thomas can be appro-

priated within Protestant ethics, see Thomas K. Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics: An Evangelical Proposal* (Bonn: VKW, 2005), available as a download <https://thomaskjohnson.academia.edu/research#ethicsandphilosophy>

¹⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, question 96, article 4. The translation used is that of Manuel Velasquez (Copyright 1983), an excerpt of which appears in *Ethics: Theory and Practice*, edited by Manuel Velasquez and Cynthia Rostankowski (Prentice Hall, 1985), pp. 41-54. The quotation is from pages 52 and 53. There are significant Latin-to-English translation questions regarding this text. Some translations use the term “human good” instead of “rights of humanity;” the term “rights of human-

ity” seems to fit the context better than does “human good.” The choice Thomas made to locate his discussion of human rights within his discussion of the natural moral law indicates that he saw human rights protection as an organic part of the purpose of the natural moral law. Aquinas saw the natural law as God’s universal moral law which is built into creation and into properly functioning practical reason. Because the natural moral law comes from God through creation, the content is consistent with the moral law specially revealed in the Bible. Regardless of the relation of people to the Bible, they receive great benefit from the natural moral law.

The Author

Über den Autor



Thomas K. Johnson is one of the foremost evangelical voices in the world today on behalf of human rights and religious freedom, as well as a crucial participant in growing evangelical-Catholic cooperation to address global issues.

Dr. Johnson serves as vice president for research at the Martin Bucer International School of Theology and Research Institutes, as senior advisor to the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) Theological Commission, and as special advisor for the WEA's International Institute for Religious Freedom. In 2016, he was named the WEA's Special Envoy to the Vatican. In that role, he works directly with Pope Francis and other high-level Catholic leaders to coordinate joint efforts on human rights, religious freedom, and other issues.

Dr. Johnson has authored six books and more than 250 articles, essays, and book chapters. His best-known work is *Human Rights: A Christian Primer*, which became a standard evangelical resource upon its publication in 2008. Its second edition, in 2016, was jointly released by the WEA and the Vatican-based *Dignitatis Humanae* Institute.

In December 2016, the Sovereign and Imperial House of Ghassan, the only Christian royal family in the Middle East, honored Dr. Johnson for his international human rights efforts by bestowing knighthood upon him.

Dr. Johnson, who holds a PhD in ethics as well as a seminary degree, has taught philosophy or theology at eleven institutes of higher learning in nine countries, including the dissident, anticommunist European Humanities University in Minsk, Belarus (later forced into exile in Lithuania) and Charles University in Prague. He is a member of the Royal Ghassanid Academy of Arts and Sciences; board president of the Comenius Institute (Prague); and an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church in America.

Dr. Johnson lives in Prague with his wife, Leslie P. Johnson, who was the first director of the Christian International School of Prague and now serves as an educational consultant for the Association of Christian Schools International. They have three grown children and four grandchildren.

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