

A paradox of life in the West (and, by influence, also in the East and South) in these past two centuries is the shift in SELF-EVIDENCE from theocentricity to anthropocentricity (a cosmic transposition) and, in tandem, from dignity in humanity as derivation from God to dignity inherent in humanity. Since World War II, this shift has been increasingly politicized--by Ghandi, by M.L.King Jr., by "right-to-life"-ers (antiabortionists), by disinvestors (ecopolitical action against the government of Pretoria), and by "human rights" extenders (to the "right" to housing, medical services, et al). This thinksheet is about (1) the origins of the modern notion of "human dignity" and (2) the dubious value of the worldwide rise in the hope that coercion by government action and private-sector action can advance human values under the banner of "human dignity."....Confession: I find my devotional-philosophical soul increasingly alienated from those who use my religion, Christianity, to rubberstamp (1) the "human dignity" notion as it's evolved in the West-and-world since the late 15th c. and (2) the coercion hope (as there's a double internal contradiction, for Christians, between this coercion hope and the biblical-prophetic persuasion hope, and between the biblical trust in God and the humanist trust in societal force/enforcement).

1. Among my possessions relevant to this thinksheet's point, the most dramatic is my copy of Jefferson's butchered NEW TESTAMENT, a humanist reductionist production shifting from theocentricity to anthropocentricity. This is the guy who wrote "self-evident" into our USA Declaration of Independence! It galls me to hear Jewish and Christian leaders using "self-evident" in the same naive God-reducing way as did this 18th-c. deist. Biblically, only God is self-evident; not humanity, and most certainly not "human rights," the phrase signaling the politicization of the humanist-cultural phrase "human dignity." One factor making for Amer. blindness vis-a-vis the rest of the world is Amer. "civil religion" with its sacred texts, the Declaration and the Constitution. Biblical religion, with its critical distancing of the believer from idolatries (including the canonization of national customs and documents), should protect believers against all humanisms and provincialisms. But most Americans, in ways differing only with their degrees of sophistication, treat Jefferson as the Moses of the American Religion.

2. Yes, the late 15th c. The two dignities touch on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, but the divine is primal: God is touching Adam into life: Michelangelo thus related his two honorings, of Revelation & Renaissance. So also daVinci, who in 1494 completed his 11-year project, "Madonna of the Rocks." To stick with that same year, here are two each for the sides becoming more sharply drawn as that century drew to its close:

REVELATIONISTS:

In 1494, Savonarola gained control of Florence and set up his short-lived theocracy. Florence! Heart of the Renaissance!

In 1494, Walter Hylton (or Hilton) published his LADDER OF PERFECTION (SCALA PERFECTIONIS, the soul's journey to Spiritual Jerusalem, first published this year, though he d. in 1396). The mystical "dark night" separates the two purifications, viz, of faith and of feeling. High spiritual psychology in the tradition of Augustine: he headed an Augustinian Priory.

HUMANISTS:

In 1494, the French humanist Rabelais was born.

In 1494, the Italian humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola died. His, THE DIGNITY OF MEN. Though a devout Christian and an admirer of Savonarola, who put the Dom. habit on Pico's corpse, his breadth of learning inclined him to such admiration for human potentiality as to provide others with ground for celebrating noble dignity as inherent in humanity. The precursors of the French Revolution dissociated nobility from royalty so as to associate it with all humanity.