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Franklin, Patrick S. Review of *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision is Key to the World's Future*, by David P. Gushee. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 2013. *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith: Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 65, no. 3 (2013): 204-206.

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sally believed and practiced. In fact, throughout most of human history, and in many places in the world even today, humans have *not* typically recognized the special worth of other human beings outside of their own particular society, tribe, class, or group. As David Gushee puts it, “indifference toward most members of our fellow species, with special hatred for a few and special reverence for a different few, seems the common human experience” (p. 25). So where did this important idea come from? And can it be sustained today, along with the conviction to press its implications—even when those implications are inconvenient, costly, or threatening to one’s own comfort or security?

In his groundbreaking book, *The Sacredness of Human Life: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision Is Key to the World’s Future*, Christian ethicist David P. Gushee sets out to answer these and other important questions concerning the special value of all human life. Gushee has thought long and hard about such issues, and his knowledge and experience as a scholar and activist well qualify him to write such a book. His earlier research sensitized him to the horrors of human life and rights violations, specifically those committed by the Nazis during World War Two (see his *Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*; St. Paul, MN: Paragon, 1994). As an activist, Gushee has served on the Committee on Ethics, Religion, and the Holocaust of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum since 2008. He has also served as the president of Evangelicals for Human Rights, has helped to found the New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good, and is currently involved in the Two Futures Project and the Matthew 5 Project (both peacemaking initiatives).

Gushee’s stated aim in *The Sacredness of Human Life* is to contribute “clarity and depth to the moral vision of the church and, perhaps ... something constructive to national and global struggles to secure a livable human future” (p. 1). He is motivated by the conviction that “a moral norm called the sacredness of human life *should be* central to the moral vision and practice of followers of Christ” (p. 7; italics original), and he seeks to offer a constructive account of that norm. His method is to recount the origins and historical development of the concept of the sacredness of human life, from its roots in the Bible, through its budding and blossoming in Christian tradition and history (even while acknowledging its neglect and withering in certain times and contexts), to its meaning and implications for the present.



ETHICS

THE SACREDNESS OF HUMAN LIFE: Why an Ancient Biblical Vision Is Key to the World’s Future by David P. Gushee. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013. xvi + 423 pages, bibliography, indices. Hardcover; \$35.00. ISBN: 9780802844200.

The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights regards “the recognition of the inherent dignity” of all humans beings as foundational for “freedom, justice and peace in the world.” But what, precisely, grounds and sustains this belief in the special worth of human beings? It is not simply a self-evident rational deduction. Nor is it something verifiable by empirical observation. Nor is it univer-

Gushee begins in chapter 1 by clarifying what it means to say that life is sacred. Through conceptual analysis, he defends his preference of the term “sacredness” as carrying theological meaning and depth that rival terms lack. “Sacredness” is “precisely the idea that all human beings have been *consecrated to a special status by the agency of God*” (italics added). Thus, human beings do not possess sacredness as an inherent quality. They are sacred because God regards and declares them to be so. Other terms, such as “sanctity” and “dignity” are acceptable but not sufficient to account for all that “sacred” includes. Etymologically and conceptually, “sanctity” has moralist connotations (within the domain of words like purity, holiness, and virtue) while “dignity” has roots outside of the Christian tradition, originally associated with the concept of rank in ancient Greco-Roman culture (the term “dignitary” still carries this meaning). After presenting a number of influential Christian definitions of sacredness, Gushee provides his own and then explains and develops it throughout the book.

Chapters 2–4 cover the development of the sacredness of human life in the Old Testament, New Testament (NT), and the early pre-Constantinian church. Gushee’s treatment of the biblical texts is thorough and enlightening, covering well-known concepts such as the *imago Dei* (and its christological development in the NT), but also pointing to the broad biblical narrative and to significant theological themes (e.g., creation theology, liberation themes, covenant/legal material, the prophetic vision of *shalom*, the life and teachings of Jesus, and the significance of Christ’s incarnation, cross, resurrection, and ascension). Gushee does not ignore “texts of terror” within scripture that could potentially undermine its overarching affirmation of life’s sacredness (e.g., God-sanctioned violence, patriarchy, slavery, and anti-Jewish sentiments in the NT). Such texts must be interpreted in light of the life, character, and teachings of Jesus Christ. The early church demonstrated its commitment to this overarching biblical theme through its rejection of war, abortion and infanticide, judicial torment and killing, and through its stress on love without partiality.

Chapter 5 narrates what Gushee calls “the fateful transition to Christendom.” Gushee’s treatment is refreshingly balanced here. Resisting the popular tendency to place all the blame for the wrongs of the church on Constantine’s shoulders, he argues that the post-Constantinian church retained the biblical emphasis on life’s sacredness, but also introduced factors that simultaneously undermined

that emphasis. Notably, Christianity lost its marginal status and its cultural distinctiveness; this opened the doorway to compromise (e.g., from affirming nonviolence and suffering persecution to sanctioning state violence and the persecution of others). In chapter 6, Gushee provides three case studies that juxtapose a tragic period of Christian history with representative examples of Christians who remained faithful to the biblical-theological vision of the sacredness of human life (the crusades, St. Francis of Assisi; colonialism, Bartolomé de Las Casas; antisemitism, the early Baptist minister Richard Overton).

In chapter 7, Gushee discusses the Enlightenment era, in which belief in the sacredness of human life took on new forms and became grounded in new ways. Though there was a shift away from religious language, much of the substance of the religious tradition survived, and its implementation actually improved through developments in law and politics. Gushee provides a very interesting discussion of John Locke, highlighting the explicitly Christian foundations of his political thought, and of Immanuel Kant, who carried forward the emphasis on human dignity but severed its epistemological basis from its theological roots (probably unsuccessfully, as philosophers such as Nicholas Wolterstorff have argued).

Chapters 8–9 track the rejection of the Christian emphasis on the sacredness of human life in Nietzsche and Hitler. Without demonizing either figure and with due consideration to their biographical and historical contexts, Gushee examines their writings to uncover explicit contempt for human life and the disastrous consequences that ensued.

In chapters 10–11, Gushee considers the implications of the sacredness of human life for several contemporary issues such as abortion, biotechnological innovation, the death penalty, human rights, nuclear weapons, women’s rights, and the relationship between human sacredness and the value of nonhuman life and care for the earth. While the latter issue receives a chapter-length treatment, Gushee’s engagement with the other contemporary issues is brief and leaves much for consideration, critical questioning, and debate. Chapter 12 provides a helpful summary and conclusion.

The Sacredness of Human Life is comprehensive, highly nuanced, well informed by diverse and relevant interdisciplinary scholarship, and is biblically and theologically thick in its description, argument, and ethical vision. Although not specifically

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about science, it is a book that can deeply clarify and strengthen one's understanding and theological convictions concerning why and how one practices science as a Christian. Science can serve the glory and pleasure of the Creator by endeavoring to safeguard and advance the flourishing of all human life. I highly recommend it to the readers of *PSCF*.

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