

Building a Human Rights Culture
South African and
Swedish Perspectives

Karin Sporre &
H Russel Botman [eds.]

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CONTENTS

7 Introduction

KARIN SPORRE

ECONOMY AND HUMAN RIGHTS

20 Human Dignity and Economic Globalization

H RUSSEL BOTMAN

35 Economic Equality, Civic Traditions and Human Rights

ULF MAGNUSSON

DEMOCRACY AND CITIZENSHIP

54 Human Rights, Citizenship and Welfare: The Swedish Model

LARS PETTERSON

77 Curbing Women's Suffrage.

Expectations, Apprehensions and Strategies

JAN GRÖNDAHL

102 More Representation or More Participation?

Challenges in Swedish Democracy

ERIK AMNÅ

SOCIAL CONDITIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

128 Pretending Democracy. Learning and Teaching
Participation in Two Swedish Schools

ÅSA BARTHOLDSSON

142 Women in the Church. Solidarity in Suffering
in the Context of HIV/AIDS

MIRANDA PILLAY

164 Othering from Within – Sometimes Other,
Sometimes Not. On being a Young Turk in Sweden

JUDITH NARROWE

RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

179 Freedom of Religion and the Equality and Dignity
of Women. A Christian Feminist Perspective

DENISE M. ACKERMANN

194 Trinitarian Anthropology, Ubuntu and Human Rights

NICO KOOPMAN

GENDER ISSUES AND HUMAN RIGHTS

208 Different Space for Action – a Way to Understand Rape

STINA JEFFNER

220 The Vanishing Father. Changing Constructions
of Fatherhood in Drum Magazine 1951–1965

LINDSAY CLOWES

245 A Profile of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Human Rights

KATHY NADASEN

A HUMAN RIGHTS CULTURE

274 Sentiment and the Spread of A Human Rights Culture

J P ABRAHAMS

288 Women's Human Rights in Sweden – a Feminist Ethical Perspective

KARIN SPORRE

311 On a Human Rights Culture in a Global Era.
Some Ecological Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

BY KARIN SPORRE

Human rights can be approached from different perspectives, for instance as a legal or philosophical issue, from the point of view of governments or of organizations keeping a watch on and drawing attention to human rights violations. Our approach here is yet another one, namely, the question “How to build a human rights culture?”. We invited academic colleagues in South Africa and Sweden to share their reflections on this topic. They are active in the fields of history, political science, the history of economics, sociology, gender studies, social anthropology, philosophy, social ethics and theology. We met at a colloquium in Stellenbosch, South Africa, in November 2002. We discussed the papers we had prepared individually and shared our thoughts in discussion and reflection. The sixteen texts we publish in this book emanate from this process. Each author addresses in her or his own way the question of how to build a human rights culture. Before introducing these texts, we will briefly sketch the background to the colloquium.

An exchange project...

In October 1999 we, H Russel Botman and Karin Sporre, met in Stockholm to discuss a possible co-operation project between our academic institutions, Högskolan Dalarna (HDa) and the University of the Western Cape (UWC). We knew one another through the network of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and had also met when Russel Botman had visited Sweden to lecture during the 1990's. I, Karin, had been intrigued then by the understanding of justice – justice as restoration – which Russel Botman and other South African theologians were developing as a way of handling the atrocities of apartheid, a way of conceptualizing justice in such a way that attention may be centred on the future and not the past.

To Remember and To Heal. Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation, is the title of one of the books conveying some of this thinking, edited by H Russel Botman and Robin Petersen, (Botman & Petersen,

1996). For me Karin, such an understanding of justice illuminated justice issues as they appeared in my study: *Först när vi får ansikten – ett flerkulturellt samtal om feminism, etik och teologi* (Eng.: First when we have faces – a cross-cultural conversation on feminism, ethics and theology), (Sporre, 1999).

In 1999, Högskolan Dalarna urged its staff to extend their international academic contacts so as to create opportunities for international co-operation, which was the reason why we met with Russel Botman. We then agreed to work for an academic exchange and decided that Russel Botman would make another visit to Sweden and then come to Högskolan Dalarna.

This visit materialized a little more than a year later, in November 2000. By then, two important things had happened for the further development of our project. Firstly, the Linneaus-Palme program had been launched. This is a Swedish program for academic exchange with countries outside the northern hemisphere. In May 2000, we applied for funding for the planning phase of our project. We received such funding for the years 2000–2001. Secondly, at the beginning of the year 2000, H Russel Botman moved together with a colleague and a group of students from the University of the Western Cape to the University of Stellenbosch – a move intended to assist in the development of creating a more racially diverse South Africa. However Russel Botman continued to teach, now as guest professor at the University of the Western Cape. For our project, this meant that we were now three academic institutions involved in the exchange: the University of the Western Cape, the University of Stellenbosch and Högskolan Dalarna.

... with an educational idea

During the planning phase, we developed the basic ideas of our project. At the centre is an educational idea that builds on an assumption, hard to prove but still very reasonable, namely, that if you take South African students with their backgrounds in their society and Swedish students with their backgrounds in their society and allow these students to study human rights together, preferably as interdisciplinary studies, you will get different learning processes than you would have got had they studied each in their own countries. In putting this idea into practice the Linneaus-Palme program became a major sponsor for us. In the planning phase, it was also important to spread the idea in our institutional contexts, among administrators, staff and students, in order for us to be able to carry it out. There were also questions concerning “when” and “how”

in terms of semesters and curricula and a number of other practical matters. Through exchange visits to HDa, US and UWC and also after getting more staff and colleagues involved, the project slowly got under way.

Now, in 2002–2003, we have carried out the first year of exchange. It started in the second semester of 2002, when four Swedish students studied in South Africa at UWC and US. Two Swedish faculty members were also in South Africa, roughly a month each. In the first semester of 2003, it was time for three South African faculty members to visit Högskolan Dalarna, 4–5 weeks each, and four students have studied a full semester here. We thought it would be wise if students, both South African and Swedish, were to start their studies abroad in the winter and then experience spring and warmer weather as their stay and studies proceeded. One of our obvious goals for the studies is the exchange of perspectives and in a small report, hopefully soon to be published, some of the first fruits in this respect of the study process at HDa will be available.

Humanity in a Global Era

In our early discussions, Russel Botman, stated that the question: “How to build a human rights culture?” was a crucial one from a South African point of view, this to assist the development that would create new realities in support of the new constitution adopted after the downfall of apartheid. The South African constitution firmly states and so establishes the value of each and every citizen in stating their human dignity, dignity to be respected and upheld. For me, Karin, being at HDa where teacher training is one of the important academic activities, I saw that there is an important pedagogical potential in framing the question thus: “How to build a human rights culture?”. I also saw that a human rights culture was crucial in Sweden, where for instance the problems of the integration of immigrants and Neo-Nazi tendencies have currently to be dealt with. So as partners in co-operation, we agreed that this question, which may be approached in different academic ways, would be a vital one in our exchange. We understood that it could encourage both a study of the principles of human rights and their history, as well as the societal conditions for trying to realize them, and not least, it could get critical and constructive discussions going of how to make them “work” in practice.

Along the road, we have been asked in what sense we use the term ‘culture’, in our question. One could say that we could just as easily have used the term, society – “How to build a human rights society?” might just as well have been

a possible question. However, in choosing to use ‘culture’, we want to underline a more qualitative aspect of the issues. One may have a society where, from a legal point of view, human rights are guaranteed but, unless a culture exists, created by people for people, where the citizens recognize their own rights and deeply respect those of others, without such a ‘culture’ the legal framework is merely superficial, therefore the term, a human rights culture.

We also agreed to call our project, the exchange and other activities, “Humanity in a Global Era”. By this we wanted to emphasize that any study of human rights today must necessarily take into consideration global processes – cultural, economic and political. We chose to use the concept, ‘humanity’, to emphasize as ours a humanistic approach to the questions of human rights, putting us as fellow human beings in a state of global solidarity with one another.

The colloquium

Early in our planning we dreamt of holding a conference gathering teachers and researchers, academic colleagues who might be potential future resources in the exchange. We had the hunch that in bringing together a group of colleagues, we might even be able to get an idea of what possible academic encounters might grow out of the long-term learning-processes that the exchange would initiate. The report from such a conference could also be of use in the exchange itself, for students and professors to study, comment upon, question, so that the intellectual development of our project would continue. From a colloquium also, further ideas for future research co-operation could be identified and developed.

The dream of bringing colleagues together became reality when the colloquium took place in November 2002, from which this is the report. For its realization, we have received funding from SIDA, Swedish International Development Cooperation Authority, the Department for Democracy and Social Development, Education Division.

The texts

Any classification of a given number of texts can be made in different ways. I have chosen to present the sixteen texts here under the following headlines:

a/ Economy and human rights, b/ Democracy and citizenship, c/ Social conditions and human rights, d/ Religion and human rights, e/ Gender iss-

ues and human rights, *f/* A human rights culture. The themes of the articles sometimes, interestingly, coincide very well and sometimes, also interestingly, depart from one another. Thematic connections can be discovered between articles in different sections. A particular article might just as well have been placed in one section as in another. In making the classification, I have tried to catch the bottom line of the articles. It should also be said that each of the sixteen contributions is a story in its own right; it has an academic disciplinary context to which it relates, an academic tradition to which it belongs both methodologically as well as in terms of discourse and choice of perspectives and themes. Also the concerns of the author become evident and consequently all the authors are responsible each for their own text. The fact that we shared discussions in a colloquium does not mean that the opinions stated here are shared by each and every one. For the opinions expressed in the articles, each author is individually responsible.

Our academic contexts express both similarities and differences. This will become evident to a reader of our texts. However in writing, we have tried not to be too insulated in our own contexts – societal and disciplinary, but rather to be alert to the need for explaining the backgrounds to our academic and societal conditions so as to facilitate the reader's task.

The case of theology and religious studies may need an extra comment in this respect. In Sweden, most academic work in theology and religious studies over the last 40–50 years has been developed in a style that presupposes an approach tending to be value neutral, and distanced from faith, meaning that theology, as it has traditionally been understood within the Christian tradition, has been left to the churches to develop within their confessional contexts. In South Africa, this development is not the case: academic theology may be developed as “within” a faith context, but still certainly allow for an academic theologian to keep a critical distance to the teaching of a church or churches, while undertaking her or his work in an academic style and fashion. In this way, distance to churches can be developed but with faith as a given presupposition. As a background to this, it should be stated that religious institutions play a more significant societal role in South Africa than in Sweden, the latter being a more secularized country.

Economy and human rights

The first two texts discuss relationships between human rights and the economy. In doing this, they also give, as a background, a good introduction to the present-day situation of the South African and Swedish societies respectively. The texts are written by a lecturer in the history of economics and a social ethicist.

The social ethicist is *H Russel Botman* and, in his article, the complexities of the South African situation are treated. Botman takes as his starting point the new South African constitution with its basis in the dignity of all human beings. He then discusses the contradictions and complexities when dealing with human dignity against the background of the atrocities committed during the era of the apartheid system. He clearly draws into the discussion the need for reparations and justice as restoration and does so in the context of second and first generations of human rights. He also relates the discussion to global economic issues.

Ulf Magnusson, who specializes in the history of economics, discusses the relationships between human rights and economic development. His thesis is that economic equality is a precondition for citizens to exert their human rights as citizens. The setting for Magnusson's discussion is a dialogue with the work of Robert Putnam and other scholars. When Magnusson substantiates his argument with economic facts, he gives an overview of the development of Swedish society, particularly in the last twenty to thirty years. So both Botman and Magnusson, consequently, discuss economic matters and their importance for human rights.

Democracy and citizenship

Three out of the sixteen texts fall under the category of democracy and citizenship. They are all written by Swedes, two by historians, *Lars Petterson* and *Jan Gröndahl*, and the third one by political scientist, *Erik Amnå*. Lars Petterson's text takes us mainly back to the 19th century when he discusses the historical background to the so-called Swedish Welfare Model, a concept much used in describing Swedish society from the 1960's and onwards. What Petterson does is to discuss the historical background to this societal development. He then elaborates on the development of popular movements (in Swedish: *folkrörelser*) and their growth as a response to changes in Swedish society during the 19th century. He draws on the findings of his research and that of other researchers

in this field and discusses critically the interpretation of this particular epoch made by other historians.

Gröndahl has studied a crucial moment in Swedish history around the year 1921, when women and also all men irrespective of income were allowed to vote for the first time. He has done so in a “microscopic” study of the city of Gävle, the fifth largest city in Sweden at that time. Gröndahl’s focus is on whether the expansion of the electorate to include women in reality meant a change in the way politics operated. What did the inclusion of women, definitely a considerable number of new voters, actually mean? What kind of power struggles developed? Did gender matter and, if so, for what?

The third text on democracy focuses on most recent research. Erik Amnå summarizes and discusses the findings of the Swedish Parliamentary Commission on Democracy, who published their main report in 2000 and whose principal secretary he was. Amnå discusses Swedish society from the point of view of different current attitudes towards democracy among the citizens, as well as four different ways of characterizing the Swedish democracy. He concludes by formulating three crucial civic virtues: involvement, participation and influence.

These three texts, taken together, sketch the development of Swedish democracy, by pointing to movements, actors and attitudes among citizens. Through these texts, different aspects of citizenship are brought forward from different epochs in the Swedish development of democracy.

Social conditions and human rights

The next section consists of three texts, which all treat different social conditions and relate them to basic human rights. Education, health care and questions of identity within an immigrant group are the themes.

Schools as arenas for the young and growing generation form one crucial topic within any discussion of human rights and democracy. Here *Åsa Bartholdsson*, a social anthropologist, writes about her own fieldwork, in which she shared a number of days with Swedish school-children. She focuses on the space for Swedish pupils to express themselves authentically in the classroom. And the question that lingers on after reading is, can democracy be learnt or not through such praxis in school life as Bartholdsson describes?

The second text discusses a societal problem, most real and whose dimensions are hard to overview, the questions of HIV/Aids in South Africa. Ethicist and

theologian *Miranda Pillay* focuses in her text on how women and also children are affected and how silence concerning issues of sexuality makes women, often powerless in their relationships, even more powerless in this particular situation. In feminist theology and its re-reading of the early history of the Christian church, which could be empowering to women, and in not idealizing the issues of bodies as brought to attention through the work of recent theologians, Pillay finds a direction for work within churches so that the issues of HIV/AIDS can be dealt with responsibly and with hope.

The third study in this section took its starting point in schools among Turkish immigrant children in Sweden. In a recent follow-up study, some fifteen years later, *Judith Narrowe*, a social anthropologist, interviewed the former youngsters, who are now grown-ups. In her article, Narrowe describes and analyses how these young people use an “othering from within”, a strategy to form an identity which integrates both Turkish and Swedish elements, so as to uphold ethnic boundaries and cope with the situation as immigrants, or rather, as the children of immigrants in Sweden.

Religion and human rights

Two of the articles by South African authors deal more specifically with issues of religion and human rights. *Denise Ackerman*, a feminist theologian in the Christian tradition, poses the question of the rights of women to religion within their own religious tradition given that a patriarchal tradition, time and time again, tends to exclude women. In her article, Ackerman formulates a principled argument for the right to a religion that respects the individual, when the individual is a woman. She does so against the background of the South African constitution.

In the second article in this section, *Nico Koopman*, systematic theologian and ethicist, given a recent re-interpretation of the trinity within the Christian tradition, takes on the task of finding a foundation for an understanding of human beings as interdependent, vulnerable and caring. Together with an emphasis on ubuntu, community, he thus finds what could form a foundation for building a human rights culture.

Gender issues and human rights

A gender perspective is present in several of the contributions. I group three of them together under this headline. The first of them is written by *Stina Jeffner*, a sociologist, who presents her own research among Swedish teenagers concerning their attitudes to rape. She has interviewed a number of young women and men about what constitutes rape but also about their understanding of what good sexual relationships are. Jeffner analyses what spaces understandings of love and rape create for young women and men respectively. She argues that men's violence against women in intimate relationships is not compatible with basic human rights and that a critical attitude towards what is regarded as "normal" in the relationships of women and men is absolutely necessary.

Lindsay Clowes draws our attention to the question of men as fathers, but also as husbands and family members. In her research, she has analysed shifting masculinities, expressed in the descriptions of men in the South African Drum magazine, a magazine published from 1951–1965, largely written "by black men for an urban black male audience." She describes a shift from the start of the period studied, when men were given a place within the diverse relationships of family and kin, only to become autonomous and independent breadwinners with invisible wives, children and other family members towards the end of the period. Clowes relates this to theories of gender constructions as well as to the changing societal realities of apartheid.

The third essay here is written by *Kathy Nadasen*, an anthropologist. Her article describes the phenomenon of female genital mutilation (FGM), different practices and their consequences. Out of the international discussion, she lifts up the judgement that female genital mutilation is to be seen as a form of torture. However, as this general international view does not stop the practice of FGM, the phenomenon needs to be described and analysed so that knowledge about it is improved and can contribute to the long-term well-being of women.

A future human rights culture

The articles above have approached different societal aspects: historical, economic, cultural or other related to a human rights culture. Here, in the last section, I have brought together three articles in which the authors ponder more directly on the question of how to build it. The first is written by a philosopher, the second, by an ethicist and the third one, by a systematic theologian.

J P Abrahams, a philosopher, argues in his article for the importance of feelings, sentiments, when building a human rights culture. Along with Richard Rorty, he argues against a universalist understanding of human nature as a foundation for human rights. He also questions a sense of moral superiority that might accompany the existence of human rights in a given country. Given the background in the South African society of rights not having been equal for all human beings, Abrahams focuses on how differences between human beings can be bridged and so shows how the resources and limits of philosophy can be used critically in dealing with this matter, his main argument being that differences can be overcome through emotional encounters between human beings.

In the second article, *Karin Sporre*, an ethicist, discusses the confusing Swedish reality with apparent political equality between women and men co-existing with economic discrimination and violence against women and sexual abuse. She searches for an understanding of this confusing reality through a re-reading of works of Harald Ofstad, a Scandinavian moral philosopher. She then phrases the question of whether contempt for women as a parallel to the admiration of men and male power can be significant in a patriarchal understanding of women. In her discussion, she tentatively develops criteria for a human rights culture and suggests further research in the field.

In the last article, *Ernst Conradie*, systematic theologian and ethicist, touches on the extensive discussions on the foundation of human rights. Further, he exemplifies different initiatives to discuss global ethical issues. He argues for the need of including ecological concerns in the discussions of how to build a human rights culture and sees the common need for a preservation of the environment as a possible meeting point for people beyond the differences between them. He also argues for religious communities to be important actors in the moral formation he deems necessary, as legal frameworks are not enough to make rights become a living reality for human beings.

Mirroring societies – a few concluding thoughts

A collection of texts such as this one poses, of course, a number of questions and challenges to its readers as well as to its editor. The situations in the two societies mirrored in these texts are different and still in other respects they also have similarities. The Swedish society has long democratic popular traditions; in South Africa this is a more recent development. The new South African constitution explicitly states the human dignity of each and every citizen in

powerful language at the same time as the implementation of the citizen's rights puts enormous strains on society, when economic scarcity is a reality at the same time. Citizens in the Swedish society might lose a clear view of how a deeper human rights culture is realized, for instance in terms of gender issues, children and immigrants, and might have a delusive sense that it has all been achieved – an impression which needs to be questioned.

Some readers might have wished this book to mirror “exactly” the same areas of society so as to make comparisons “even” – implying that articles should have parity with one another, one on schools in South Africa and one on schools in Sweden, for instance. However, this is obviously not the case. But this does not rule out comparisons. Comparisons are possible – when the reader compares with what she or he knows of her/his own society, or compares the South African and Swedish societies according to what he/she knows about the two societies. In such a way, questions on a human rights culture may be directed towards the society of the reader, be it South Africa, Sweden or some other country.

In a follow up to this first study, more comparative studies could be made, for instance: in areas such as gender and culture, democracy and citizenship, children and human rights, education, economic development and human rights and gender and religion – to mention just a few areas touched upon here.

Acknowledgements

Several sponsors made this book possible. SIDA, the Department for Democracy and Social Development, Education Division is the first to be mentioned. Without their support, the colloquium would not have taken place and consequently this book would never have been written. However, had it not been for the Linneaus-Palme program, the exchange would not have come about – the exchange project which the colloquium builds on. Thanks to both these Swedish organizations.

To the total picture of sponsors, our universities also belong: the University of Stellenbosch, the University of the Western Cape and Högskolan Dalarna, where our exchange project as well as the colloquium have received support in different ways, such as the assistance of administrative staff, the provision of other resources, without which this project would not have been realized. For this support from colleagues and superiors, and for the funding from SIDA and the Linneaus-Palme program I am very grateful.

This editorial introduction starts with a strong "we", meaning H Russel Botman and Karin Sporre. It ends with an "I" meaning Karin Sporre. In July 2002 Russel Botman was appointed Vice Rector (Teaching) at US. This change of tasks from professor to Vice Rector meant that the two of us could not carry out this project jointly right to the very end. However, throughout this process, actually starting in 1999, I, Karin, have enjoyed the friendship and collegiality of Russel Botman. We have shared a joint vision and many ideas, out of which some important ones were realized in the exchange project and this very colloquium. Thank you Russel for our cooperation!

However my thanks need to be extended to all my colleagues who wrote these texts. Academic life is about taking important questions seriously, grappling and struggling with them, so as, in the long perspective, to assist us all, humanity and our habitat, in making life for us all, hopefully, a bit easier.

What societal processes contribute to a human rights culture? What violations are actually taking place? How can gender, ecological and global economic perspectives enlighten these issues?

These and other questions are discussed in this interdisciplinary collection of texts by sixteen scholars from South Africa and Sweden.



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