

A Universal Right to Refuse to Kill?

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ABSTRACT

Should Christians affirm a universal right to refuse to kill? This article makes use of an abstract, reductive theoretical experiment that utilises a simple scenario as a tool to investigate the question. The author argues that theologies of liberation are best placed to explore ethical dilemmas surrounding conflicting human rights, especially in contexts of violence. Using the hierarchisation of human rights in these theologies, the article demonstrates that the right to refuse to kill is an individual preferential right for the powerful that must be subject to the necessary rights of the community and the marginalised. For Christians, it is, as with all human rights issues, enforceable only in the context of a self-sacrificial Christ-centred view of achieving human rights.

A Simple Problem?

Seán MacBride was a respected peace activist, Ireland's foreign minister and the Assistant Secretary-General to the United Nations. As the founder of Amnesty International, he was at one time the only person to hold both the Lenin Peace Prize and the Nobel Peace Prize. During his lecture for the latter, he declared:

To the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights one more might, with relevance, be added. It is 'The Right to Refuse to Kill'.¹

Considering the four decades that have passed since his exhortation, one would assume that the question of the right to refuse to kill would have been addressed. Indeed, in relation to conscientious objection to military service some progress has

1 Seán MacBride, "Nobel Lecture" (Oslo, Norway, December 12, 1974), https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1974/macbride-lecture.html. It is interesting to note that on one level the UN considers the issue to be included in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, yet the United Nations Human Rights Committee is not unanimous in this belief. See: "Conscientious Objection to Military Service" (New York: United Nations, 2012), 5, http://ebco-beoc.org/sites/ebco-beoc.org/files/ConscientiousObjection_en.pdf. cf. "HRC Views in Case Yoon and Choi v. Republic of Korea, Communications Nos. 1321-1322/2004" (United Nations, January 23, 2007), http://www.bayefsky.com/pdf/korea_t5_iccpr_1321_1322_2004.pdf.