

Affirming human dignity for all

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We live in a time when around the world so many lives seem not to matter. Whether they be Uighur lives, women's lives, Black lives, Yemeni lives or refugee lives. So widely disregarded in practice, the large claim that every life has value, however, oftentimes has to be justified. The ultimate reason is that each human being is precious and has an inalienable dignity. No person may be used as a means to another's end.

Furthermore, human beings depend on one another to come into life and at every stage of life. For that reason we are not isolated individuals but are bound in relationships to one another and to our world. That interconnection at the heart of our humanity explains why our lives matter to others.

Life means more than merely not being dead. It includes our relationships: personal, and those to our ethnic, religious, political and social groups and to the institutions of which we are part. For that reason we can properly speak of Black lives, Catholic lives, Californian lives, Muslim lives and LGBTQ+ lives.

The network of relationships that constitutes each human life suggests that we should consider how each human life matters. This consideration draws attention to the precious humanity of each person and to the concrete relationships that shape their distinctive humanity. It leads us naturally to ask whether the way in which those social and power relationships are structured in society respects the equal humanity of each person or discriminates against it.

If we insist that each human life matters, we should be doubly grateful that people from particular groups in society protest against discrimination that devalues and puts at risk their lives, and insist that the lives of people in their group matter. Black lives, Rohingya lives, Uighur lives, Communist lives, asylum seeker lives and, I would argue, the lives of the unborn are equally precious and equally command respect. Movements that defend them assert that each human life matters.

Why, then, is any defence of human life controversial? One reason may be the tension between the grief and disturbance that we often feel when confronted with death, and the sheer number of people who lose their lives avoidably. People die in war, in avoidable starvation, are executed by governments or mobs, die of neglect, from domestic violence, in road and industrial accidents, in protests. They take their own lives, die as a result of decisions that are not their own in hospitals and elsewhere. Because it is impossible to feel equally for all, it is easy to be hostile to attempts to appeal to our compassion or anger for particular groups.

More significantly, campaigns to protect the right to life of particular groups often stand in conflict with the rights claimed by others to take those lives. Governments, for example, variously give their officers the right and even the duty to take away lives: in response to violent uprisings, in conducting war, in protecting themselves and others when policing, and in legally sanctioned executions. In the case of abortion, too, any right that might attach to a living embryo to develop into an independently living human being is commonly outweighed by a woman's right to decide what is done to her own body, particularly in situations of great need. In all these cases public security, personal need

or individual choice are understood to outweigh the personal right to life. The understanding is generally upheld by popular opinion, particularly in times of crisis.

The desire to save or make money also often outweighs in practice others' right to life. The use of unsafe building materials, the adulteration of food and the release of toxins into the air or water sources have taken many lives. Many more people die, however, because of the choice to do nothing. Despite there being enough food in the world to feed everyone and enough medicine to cure many, many people because drugs are patented and they have no access to surplus food. If we were to put a price on human life, we would have to say that the life of a person in an undeveloped nation matters less than that of someone in a wealthy nation.

That respect for life is so vulnerable in so many contexts makes it clear that in order to protect lives it is essential to change attitudes. This demands that societies must recognise the economic, racial, ideological and social structures that breed contempt for life, and must dismantle them. To ensure that all lives do count it is essential to change attitudes so that the life of someone who has committed a crime is as valuable as a person is as that of someone who is innocent, and that starvation anywhere in the world is the business of all, despite the cost of its prevention. Ultimately the coming together of prejudice and the readiness to treat people as means to others' ends makes lives not matter.