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Study Group: Religious Freedom

Paper Title: Religious Freedom: Starting with Human Dignity rather than Human Right

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The universality of the principle of religious freedom as assumed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been questioned in recent debates.^[1] The language of religious freedom as a human right tends to draw suspicions in the South Asian context. The anti-colonial sentiment in South Asia resists the language of rights as a Western hegemonic imposition upon Asian values. The Asian values discourse, as Tatsuo notes, “denies universal validity of Western concepts of human rights and democracy in order to undermine the normative foundations of Western pressure.”^[2]

This requires that Christians articulate the problem with a nuance. The recognition of religious freedom as human rights procured on the far end of appropriating human dignity in the social consciousness of the West perhaps cannot be the starting point in the south Asian context. What could then be a starting point for such a discussion in South Asia?

In this paper, I propose that the discourse begins with human worth rather than human rights. This I believe softens the resistance and thus may provide a gateway to greater individual freedoms in the South Asian context.

^[1] See my article, “Religious Freedom: Freedom of Religion or Freedom from Religion,” in *International Bulletin of Mission Research*, DOI: 10.1177/2396939319882160.

^[2] Inoue Tatsuo, “Liberal Democracy and Asian Orientalism,” in *The East Asian Challenge for Human Rights*, ed. Joanne R. Bauer and Daniel A. Bell (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999), 38.