



## Spotlight On...God & Human Rights

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### Religion is Regaining a Historic Role in Championing the Exploited

by G. Jeffrey MacDonald, *Religion BookLine* -- *Publishers Weekly*, 11/2/2005

Does  
**HUMAN RIGHTS**  
Need God?

Elizabeth M. Bucar and  
Barbra Barnett, Editors

For the past 60 years, established advocates for universal human rights have framed their arguments largely in non-religious terms, looking instead to international law as the primary basis for protection. But some new and recent books indicate that a re-framing of the issues in theological terms might be helping to motivate the masses to demand improved treatment for women, laborers and religious minorities across the globe.

In August, Eerdmans published *Does Human Rights Need God?* edited by Elizabeth M. Bucar and Barbra Barnett, two doctoral candidates in ethics at the University of Chicago Divinity School. The volume provides a long-avoided discussion forum among 12 thinkers from Islam, Christianity, Judaism and secular traditions. How they answer the title's question varies widely, yet the editors say the discussion alone has merit in light of an enduring observation made in 1945 by French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain: "We agree on these rights, providing we are not asked why. With the 'why,' the dispute begins."

"Outside the [Capitol] Beltway, the rhetoric about religion and human rights has increased since 9/11," says Bucar. "That rhetoric has allowed this conversation to happen." She says the book aims to reach not only policy makers and scholars but also anyone "committed to social justice."

Even within the Beltway, religious concerns for human rights seem to be gaining traction, according to Allen D. Hertzke, author of *Freeing God's Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2004). A political scientist at the University of Oklahoma, Hertzke chronicles under-reported episodes from the past 10 years when liberals and conservatives from various religious traditions have joined forces to push through federal policy on issues from religious persecution to human trafficking and prison rape.

"This new faith-based human rights movement is the most important since the end of Apartheid, and it's unexpected," Hertzke tells RBL. "Religion is important because it has a constituency it can mobilize."

Religious activism on human rights causes is hardly new in America, where the disenfranchised looked to religious leaders to champion causes from abolition to women's suffrage in the 19th century, and civil rights in the 20th. In this regard, today's books aren't pioneering wholly new terrain as much as they're tapping into a long and fertile tradition.

Hertzke expects his book to stimulate two groups in particular: religious conservatives who welcome a moral challenge, and human rights activists who want to know where and how passion is mounting for their causes. Similarly,

*Human Rights and the Image of God* by Roger Ruston (SCM/Canterbury Press, 2004) has libraries as a primary target, but the book is reaching general readers as well through Amazon.com, Barnesandnoble.com and Walmart.com. "We're seeing some adoptions of the book in academic settings," says Bill Falvey, director of sales for U.S. distributor Westminster John Knox. "Plus, we are delighted to see some general sales."