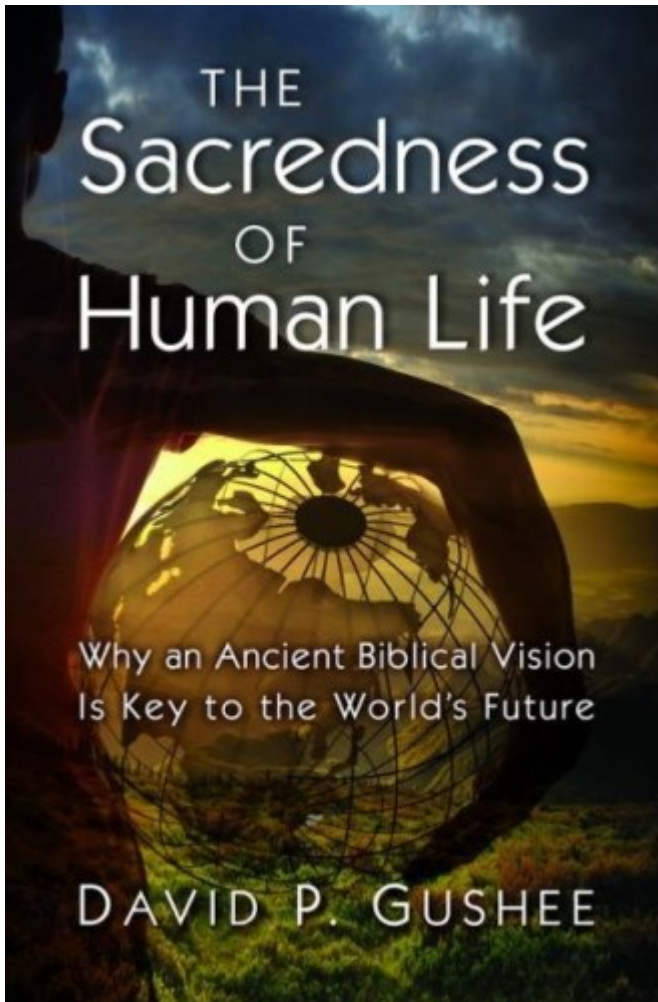


The Sacredness of Human Life, by David P. Gushee

reviewed by [Stanley Hauerwas](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

In Review



The Sacredness of Human Life

by David P. Gushee
Eerdmans

David Gushee's attempt to define and defend the concept of the sacredness of life is a welcome reminder of why it is so important that we not take for granted the protections that surround our lives and the lives of others. In this sprawling book, he

discusses extensively subjects as wide ranging as the Crusades, colonialism, Christian anti-Semitism, Locke, Kant, Nietzsche and Nazi Germany, as well as contemporary issues such as abortion, capital punishment and the status of rights that may seem only indirectly related to the main subject of the book. The breadth of the book is not accidental but reflects the fundamental argument at its heart: that our sense that life is sacred is a historical achievement that must be sustained by the memory of a people.

Gushee argues that the discovery that human life is sacred is rooted in the history of God's dealings with Israel. He does not contend that our belief that every life is to be regarded as precious is based exclusively on the Old Testament but that in the Old Testament we find its surest grounds. Appeals to natural law may sometimes provide a defense of the sacredness of life, but Gushee thinks that such sources of our reverence for life themselves emerged from a synthesis of biblical and classical sources.

Gushee begins by attempting to define what the sacredness of life means. But it is not clear to me whether *definition* is the right word to describe what Gushee does, which is basically to provide a conceptual analysis of what sacredness of life must mean given how that concept is used in common human practices. He asserts that sacredness of life means that every human life possesses dignity that demands reverence.

That analytical definition provides the resources that Gushee uses to give a "Christian definition" of what it means to say human life is sacred. According to Gushee, the Christian understanding of the sacred character of human life means that

God has consecrated each and every human being—without exception and in all circumstances—as a unique, incalculably precious being of elevated status and dignity. Through God's revelation in Scripture and incarnation in Jesus Christ, God has declared and demonstrated the sacred worth of human beings and will hold us accountable for responding appropriately.

Gushee avoids any suggestion that such a definition is begging the question by listing what he identifies as 17 puzzles it produces. For example, he asks: Is the individual or the community the subject of such regard? Another puzzle is centered on the question of what makes human life so precious. He also asks: Can a human

being behave in such a manner as to lose sacredness? In the process of exploring these puzzles, Gushee seeks to provide an adequate defense of life's sacredness.

He begins, as one would expect, with the beginning, arguing that our sense that human life is sacred reflects the presumption that we have been created in the image of God. God's compassionate care for human life, the covenant and the giving of the law, and the prophetic vision of human wholeness are further developments that make the Old Testament the source for the sense that human life is to be protected. Gushee quite rightly, I think, refuses to identify some characteristics of humans, such as rationality, as the grounds for human sacredness. It is sufficient to recognize that God has regarded humans as sacred. This means that our sacredness is not our possession but rather is conferred by God.

The coming of Jesus as the Christ, as a human being, confirms and extends the way human life was held sacred in the Old Testament. Christianity granted to all people the presumption that every human life is of equal value. The sad fact of Christians' failure to live up to their own convictions concerning the sacred character of each human life does not mean that reverence for life has been lost. Gushee argues that a conviction that humans are sacred was in the early Christian DNA, as is evident in Christians' refusal of war, condemnation of abortion and criticism of the Romans' games of brutality.

What happened to cause Christians to qualify their commitment to the sacred character of human life? Gushee's short answer is Christendom, which began with the late Roman Empire, was transmuted into European states, then was extended through colonization. Gushee is well aware that such an explanation of what happened can be far too simplistic, but he provides case studies of the Crusades, colonialism and anti-Semitism as examples of what happens when Christians assume that it is their task to rule. No doubt this aspect of his book will prove to be the most controversial, but I hope readers will not dismiss out of hand his suggestion that Christian fear of Jews may be the source of some of the most negative characteristics of these developments.

Gushee contends that the Enlightenment was a response to Christians' failure to live true to their deepest conviction that every human life is a reflection of God's regard for each one of us. Human dignity and the correlative understanding of rights became the expression, inadequate to be sure, of the Christian conviction that human life is sacred. Gushee provides sympathetic accounts of Locke's and Kant's

attempts to provide alternative philosophical arguments to sustain their inheritance of the Christian commitment to life, but he also astutely shows how their positions could be used to deny the value of each human life. I would have welcomed an engagement with George Kateb's recent book *Human Dignity* as a way to test his argument.

In an extended treatment of Nietzsche, Gushee suggests that the kind of humanistic defense of the sacredness of life that is associated with the Enlightenment was open to challenges that it could not meet on its own terms. That challenge was made all too real when the Nazis ruled Germany and the world became unwilling witness to a social and political reality that had no regard for the sacredness of life. Gushee is not suggesting that Nazi Germany is the result of the Enlightenment's inadequate defense of human life; rather, he is trying to help us see why it is so important that we not lose the significance of God's care for human life.

Oddly enough, I found Gushee's treatment of contemporary challenges to the honoring of human life—abortion, biotechnological innovations, capital punishment, nuclear weapons, women's rights—one of the least successful parts of his book. In Gushee's defense, to adequately deal with each of those topics would require another book, but I also wonder whether one of the reasons he seems less decisive about these matters is that the concept of the sacredness of life fails to provide sufficient resources to address these issues. The same point might well be made about his treatment of the care of all creation. He is careful to avoid making all creaturely life less valuable than human life, but I suspect he would only claim to have identified the problem of how the proper regard of human life cannot be separated from all life.

This brings me back to the historical character of Gushee's argument. I have no reason to think that this kind of methodology is inherently mistaken, but I do suspect, given the historical character of the argument, that the focus on the sacredness of life is too singular. While I was reading Gushee's account of early Christian attitudes toward war, abortion, and the slaughter in the Roman arenas, I often thought that the issue was not only the violation of life but a network of practices that gained their intelligibility from the worship of God. That is not telling Gushee anything he does not know, but I wish he had been able to show the difference that helps us to better understand why Christians refuse the use of violence to "do good."

In reading this book one has a sense that Gushee has poured himself into it. In the introduction he notes that the volume was originally intended to be part of a bioethics series, but he became convinced that the sacredness of human life is about more than abortion or euthanasia. I am sure he is right about that. I am equally sure that we should be grateful for this thoughtful book in which Gushee reminds us that as Christians we dare not forget that God has sanctified every human life.