

Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry (The University Center for Human Values Series)

By Michael Ignatieff

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Michael Ignatieff draws on his extensive experience as a writer and commentator on world affairs to present a penetrating account of the successes, failures, and prospects of the human rights revolution. Since the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, this revolution has brought the world moral progress and broken the nation-state's monopoly on the conduct of international affairs. But it has also faced challenges. Ignatieff argues that human rights activists have rightly drawn criticism from Asia, the Islamic world, and within the West itself for being overambitious and unwilling to accept limits. It is now time, he writes, for activists to embrace a more modest agenda and to reestablish the balance between the rights of states and the rights of citizens.

Ignatieff begins by examining the politics of human rights, assessing when it is appropriate to use the fact of human rights abuse to justify intervention in other countries. He then explores the ideas that underpin human rights, warning that human rights must not become an idolatry. In the spirit of Isaiah Berlin, he argues that human rights can command universal assent only if they are designed to protect and enhance the capacity of individuals to lead the lives they wish. By embracing this approach and recognizing that state sovereignty is the best guarantee against chaos, Ignatieff concludes, Western nations will have a better chance of extending the real progress of the past fifty years. Throughout, Ignatieff balances idealism with a sure sense of practical reality earned from his years of travel in zones of war and political turmoil around the globe.

Based on the Tanner Lectures that Ignatieff delivered at Princeton University's Center for Human Values in 2000, the book includes two chapters by Ignatieff, an introduction by Amy Gutmann, comments by four leading scholars--K. Anthony Appiah, David A. Hollinger, Thomas W. Laqueur, and Diane F. Orentlicher--and a response by Ignatieff.

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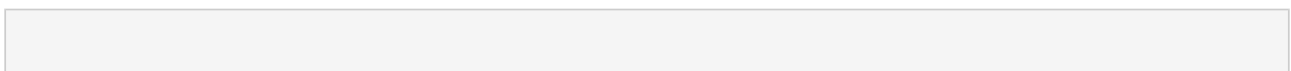
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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry may raise some hackles for its controversial approach to a sacrosanct subject, but Michael Ignatieff's arguments are carefully wrought and compassionate. Ignatieff is director of the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard University, and his work is part history of the evolution of human rights in international politics and part caution that it not become a new religion. He writes, "We need to stop thinking of human rights as trumps and begin thinking of them as a language that creates the basis for deliberation."

The book centers on two essays by Ignatieff. In the second, "Human Rights as Idolatry," he identifies three main challenges to the universality of human rights: Islam, East Asia, and, most interestingly, the West itself. According to Ignatieff, the West is forsaking its political heritage of individualism and thereby eroding the foundations upon which a truly universal system of human rights may be built. In addition to the author's intriguing essays, there is an introduction by Amy Gutmann, as well as comments from K. Anthony Appiah, David A. Hollinger, Thomas W. Laqueur, and Diane F. Orentlicher. The critical reactions to Ignatieff, together with a short response of his own, have the makings of an intelligent and accessible debate. --*Eric de Place*

From Publishers Weekly

The strength in this sensible, dense collection of essays about the burgeoning human rights movement lies not in the answers it gives but in the questions it raises. Based on lectures Ignatieff delivered at Princeton in 2000, the book opens with two long essays by the historian, journalist and novelist who directs the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy at Harvard, followed by comments from four leading scholars, including K. Anthony Appiah, with a final response from Ignatieff (*Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond*). A philosophical liberal and a strong believer in the power of constitutions, Ignatieff boldly confronts difficult issues. He tries, with some success, to balance the often conflicting needs for human rights and for the sovereignty of nation-states: "the problem in Western human rights policy is that by promoting ethnic self-determination, we may actually endanger the stability" necessary for human rights, because "we can be certain that self-determination for some groups will be purchased with the blood of the minorities in their midst." He also laments rhetoric that casts human rights as what Elie Wiesel called a "secular religion," maintaining that this notion alienates cultures wherein religion dictates governmental policy. Only when these trends are tempered, he contends, will human rights make serious inroads throughout the world, which he believes is more ready for these rights than is generally thought. The respondents cordially critique Ignatieff's practical arguments as watered down and morally relativist. Those looking for specific policy proposals for addressing these difficult issues may be unsatisfied. But Ignatieff illuminates complexities likely to make headlines as the call for intervention regarding worldwide human rights continues to grow. This book will undoubtedly provoke controversy within the human rights community.

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Review

"Michael Ignatieff is one of the few people who give political theory a good name. He writes about interesting things in an interesting way, without using jargon and without any attempt to engage in covert practical politics. His essays on human rights display all of these virtues . . . and should be read immediately

by anyone who has more than a passing interest in the political landscape of the twenty-first century."--
Oliver Letwin, *Times Literary Supplement*

"Bracing. . . . If anyone is superbly equipped to scrutinize the hybrid of theory and practical exigency at the heart of human-rights thinking, it's this unique, independent veteran of the world's war zones. . . . [This is] the shrewdest, subtlest, most realistic assessment of the logic of human rights in years."--**Carlin Romano, *Philadelphia Inquirer***

"One of the most pleasing aspects of Michael Ignatieff's frequent contributions to the human rights debate is the clarity with which he writes about a subject beset as never before by uncertainty and disagreement. Not least of the achievements of *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry* . . . is the simplicity and common sense Ignatieff introduces. And at a time when it has become fashionable to deride the gains made by the human rights movement over the years, his cautious optimism is refreshing."--**Caroline Moorehead, *The Spectator***

"This book . . . confirms Michael Ignatieff's reputation as one of the most interesting commentators on human rights issues. . . . An excellent little book. It deserves to be widely read among all those interested in human rights issues. . . . One finds oneself eagerly anticipating Ignatieff's next contribution."--**David Petrusek, *Ethics and International Affairs***

"This elegant book is a spirited attempt to put flesh on the bones of . . . politics and reunite theoretical questing with real-world situations."--**Alex Clark, *The Sunday Times (London)***

"[A] cogent analysis of the crusade for human rights. . . . The author gives a sympathetic analysis of its problems. . . . His views ring true, and he writes lucidly."--**Kirkus Reviews**

"A philosophical liberal and a strong believer in the power of constitutions, Ignatieff boldly confronts difficult issues. . . . [He] illuminates complexities likely to make headlines as the call for intervention regarding worldwide human rights continues to grow. This book will undoubtedly provoke controversy within the human rights community."--**Publishers Weekly**

"Carefully crafted, simple and direct prose working in the service of insightful analysis and passionate yet restrained advocacy . . . presented in a style that will both engage specialists and attract intelligent general readers--by a committed liberal humanist (and sympathetic critic) on the difficulties of the contemporary struggle for human rights. It is a 'must read' for anyone seriously interested in, or desiring a thoughtful general overview of, the struggle for universal human rights in contemporary international society."--**Jack Donnelly, *International Affairs***

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