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UNDERSTANDING  
HUMAN DIGNITY

Edited by  
CHRISTOPHER McCRUDDEN

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## Acknowledgements

TO A CONSIDERABLE EXTENT, this book is the outcome of a conference held in Rhodes House, Oxford, in June 2012. It largely results from discussions there in which a decidedly multidisciplinary group, including historians, legal academics, judges, political scientists, theologians, and philosophers were brought together to discuss the concept of human dignity from their various disciplinary perspectives.

Some of the main issues that the group were asked to consider include the following fundamental theoretical questions: Is there a minimum core to the meaning of human dignity? Is a person's human dignity to be assessed subjectively from his or her point of view, or 'objectively'? Can human dignity be understood in purely secular terms, or is it (as Michael Perry has claimed in respect of human rights) 'ineliminably religious'?<sup>1</sup> Can there be a shared meaning of human dignity where there is religious and ideological pluralism? What ontological claims are implied by appeals to human dignity?

Other questions were more directed at the implications of dignity for relations between individuals, and between individuals and the state: What are the implications of such ontological claims for the ways in which we should behave towards each other? What are its implications for the ways in which the state should treat those who fall under its authority?

An important set of questions posed considered the relationship between human dignity, human rights, and other values: What is the relationship between human dignity and human rights? Is human dignity more appropriately seen as attaching to some rights rather than others? What is the relationship between human dignity and other values and principles connected with rights, such as autonomy, freedom, equality, social solidarity, and identity? What is the weight and status of human dignity? Does human dignity have a status superior to that of other values? Is it absolute, or can it be balanced against other values? Does human dignity essentially serve community or individual goals? Can it also serve moralistic and paternalistic goals? Is human dignity necessarily an emancipatory idea? Is it rights-supporting or rights-constraining?

We also considered how, if at all, the concept of human dignity helps us to deal with claims made in relation to several issues that are among the most

<sup>1</sup> Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights: Four Inquiries* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 1998), ch.1. 'Is the Idea of Human Rights Ineliminably Religious?', 11-41.