Christianity and the Roots of Human Dignity

Kyle Harper  
University of Oklahoma

Where do human rights come from? Historian Kyle Harper tackles this question by tracing their origin to the period of late antiquity, when Christianity for the first time became an empowered rather than minority religion. He argues that modern human rights are fundamentally Kantian—that is, they derive ultimately from the view that human beings are incomparably worthy creatures with moral ends and that they cannot be used as instruments of collective good in ways that do not acknowledge their value. In short, human rights derive from a high view of human dignity. By looking at concrete examples—slavery, sexual coercion, and poverty—Harper documents how Christianity modeled and propelled this new conception of human dignity in the late Roman era. Ultimately, Enlightenment views on human rights were erected on a bedrock of human dignity that would be inconceivable without Christianity. No Constantine, no Kant.