



Reports

Thomas K. Johnson

Abolishing the primordial cycle of hatred,
tyranny, and violence

Why a rules-based international order was,
and is, necessary

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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for Religious Freedom

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Why a rules-based international order was, and is, necessary

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Dr. Thomas K. Johnson serves as Special Envoy to the Vatican and Special Envoy for engaging Humanitarian Islam at the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), which represents over 600 million Protestants in 143 countries world-wide. A widely published author on theology, ethics, and human rights, Professor Johnson also serves as senior theological advisor to the WEA and is co-chair of the Humanitarian Islam/WEA Joint Working Group. Among his recent books is *Humanitarian Islam, Evangelical Christianity, and the Clash of Civilizations: A New Partnership for Peace and Religious Freedom*, published by the World Evangelical Alliance Theological Commission.

CONTENTS

Introduction.....	5
The Speech.....	5

Introduction

This speech was given by Thomas K. Johnson on behalf of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) at the R20 International Summit of Religious authorities. It was given in Jakarta, Indonesia on November 27, 2023.

The Speech

From 1945 to 1950, our ancestors attempted a reboot of society. Countries took their independence from distant, abusive sovereigns; new constitutions were written; the UN charter and the Universal Declaration were proclaimed; the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Health Organization set to work; religious scholars and members reassessed the relation between faith and national identities.

This reboot became the “rules-based international order.” It was a massive attempt to avoid repeating the 35 years during which my grandparents observed two world wars, countless war crimes, genocide and ethnic cleansing, atrocities, starvation, a Depression, and a Holocaust.

The rules-based order was partly successful. World War 3 stayed partly cold, and billions of people had the opportunity to live. After 1989, I thought rules and rights might prevail. With my family, I moved to the other side of the Iron Curtain, to see a free society unfold. I was not entirely disappointed.

A decade ago, Pope Francis began to describe a piecemeal third world war. This first seemed to be a conflict of civilizations, but now it appears to be a rejection of the post-war renewal. We see conflicts without number, and our mechanisms to solve conflict are shaking. We put treaties, constitutions, charters, and declarations on paper with great fanfare; then society went paperless, a symbol of shredding a heritage.

For answers, I turned to the judges administering war crimes trials after the war. I found this:

“The trials of these Japanese and Germans all took place under a [philosophical] cloud. None of the defendants had broken the laws of their countries, since all of their actions had been [allowed] by the legal systems of their own nations. ... Since they were not American citizens they were not subject to American law. ... Respected legal scholars had pointed out that international law did not hold individuals criminally accountable for conducting wars.”¹

Some of the judges responded by saying murder is murder, even if something is wrong in the legal system. They conducted trials on that basis. Others probed deeper. Justice Henri Bernard, of the International Tribunal for the Far East, wrote,

¹ *Ethics: Theory and Practice*, edited by Manuel Velasquez and Cynthia Rostankowski, (Prentice Hall, 1985), 32.

“There is no doubt in my mind that such a war of aggression is and always has been a crime in the eyes of reason and universal conscience—expressions of natural law upon which an international tribunal can and must base itself to judge the conduct of the accused. ... [The natural law] is the law shared by all individuals and nations. Although opinions differ as to its nature, its existence is not seriously contested or contestable.”²

We who follow Bernard may prefer the terminology of a “law of humanity;” the term “natural law” sounds like the law of the jungle. Nevertheless, he identified the issue behind the reboot of society in which he participated. The leaders of that renewal assumed there is a known global standard for human behavior that provides the basis for war crimes tribunals, declarations of human rights, and a UN Charter.

In our forgetful times, we need to remind people of the great society-forming documents of our grandparents. But to recover peaceful international relations, we need many people to read the principles written on our hearts and minds, to open our eyes to reason and universal conscience. A rules-based order must be based on the law of humanity, or it will fail.

The UDHR and UN Charter say little about this natural moral law, probably to avoid religious language. In our meeting of religious authorities, we do not need to avoid such language. In the language of my Christian faith, I say there is a God-given knowledge of principles of right and wrong that is very hard for people not to know. I ask you to join me in opening our eyes to reason and universal conscience so that we reconfirm the rules-based order bequeathed to us.

² *Ethics: Theory and Practice*, 33. The editors are quoting Henri Bernard from *Trial of Japanese War Criminals* cited in John Appleman, *Military Tribunals and International Crimes* (Indianapolis, 1954), 261.

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