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# Reports

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*Janet Epp Buckingham*

## Exploring the Intersection of Faith and Universal Freedoms: Evangelical Christians and Human Rights

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International Institute  
for Religious Freedom



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## **Exploring the Intersection of Faith and Universal Freedoms: Evangelical Christians and Human Rights**



### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Dr. Janet Epp Buckingham** is an associate professor at and the Director of the Laurentian Leadership Centre, an Ottawa-based, live-in, extension program focusing on leadership in public policy, business and communications. She has lived and studied in England, France and South Africa. It was while studying at bible college and working with the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge, England, that she developed a passion for applying Christian principles to public policy. Dr. Buckingham served in an advocacy role as Executive Director of Christian Legal Fellowship (1991–94) and with the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada as general legal counsel (1999–2003) and director, law and public policy (2003–2006).

In the fall of 2006, Dr. Buckingham had a strong sense of calling to take on leadership of the Laurentian Leadership Centre. While she had taught courses at the LLC, being the director gives her greater opportunity to invest in the lives of students. She is also pleased to now participate in academic conferences on religious freedom and human rights in Canada and internationally.

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Evangelical Christians have had a complex relationship with human rights. On one hand, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UN General Assembly 1948) reflects Christian principles. On the other hand, human rights mechanisms have been used to support policies that are abhorrent to evangelical Christians' beliefs and identity. The 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration is a good time to evaluate its impact for Evangelicals. Not only do Evangelicals have a complex relationship with human rights, but they also are bifurcated on their perspective on the United Nations. An article published in 1959 in *Christianity Today*, the leading American evangelical magazine, sets out the dichotomy well, "One group is frankly and outspokenly antagonistic" (Reid 1959, 10) This group sees the United Nations as heading towards world government and potentially the source of the Anti-Christ mentioned in the Bible as part of the end-times. The book and movie series *Left Behind* depicts this well. (LaHaye and Jenkins 1995)<sup>1</sup> At the other end of the spectrum are those who support the UN's goals – peace and assistance for the poor – as consistent with Christian principles.

## Who are evangelical Christians?

The estimated 2.2 billion Christians around the world are generally divided into Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. Evangelicals are in the Protestant category but have several distinctives: they believe in a personal relationship with God; they have a high regard for the Bible that guides their daily lives; they have a conviction that salvation is only received through faith in Jesus Christ; they want to share the good news of this salvation; and they seek to serve the poor and the vulnerable. The World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), the global organization representing Evangelicals, estimates that there are more than 600 million evangelicals worldwide (World Evangelical Alliance n.d.).

The WEA was founded in 1846 in London, England to provide an international unified platform for Evangelicals. (Ewing 2022) From its inception, it engaged in advocacy against slavery and for religious freedom. As early as 1852, the WEA sent a delegation to the Turkish Sultan to plead for the Armenians. (Sauer 2009, 75) Over its 176 years, the WEA has grown to have national alliances in over 140 countries. In 1992, it formed a Religious Liberty Commission led by Johan Candelin, the WEA Global Ambassador for Religious Freedom. The WEA applied for ECOSOC status, granted in 1997, so that it could speak at the then Commission on Human Rights in Geneva. When the Commission was transformed into the Human Rights Council in 2006, the WEA began to see the need for a permanent office at the UN in Geneva. This was not established until 2012 by Michael Mutzner, who was with the Swiss Evangelical Alliance at the time. By 2023, the WEA had offices at the UN in Geneva, New York and Bonn. Both the Geneva and New York offices address human rights, with a particular focus on religious freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins published the book series starting in 1995 with Tyndale House Publishers. The movie series started in 2014 produced by Cloud Ten Pictures.

The WEA held a World Assembly in 2008, which was the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration. The delegates took that opportunity to pass a Resolution on Religious Freedom and Solidarity with the Persecuted Church, which specifically affirms the Universal Declaration. (Johnson 2017, s. 3) The resolution concludes, “We especially urge the United Nations and the UN Human Rights Council to stand against any attempt to lower or dilute the right to change one’s religion as affirmed in article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” (Johnson 2017, s. 14) This was a response to the 13 Islamic countries which continue to have the death penalty for apostasy.<sup>2</sup>

The UN headquarters in New York and Geneva address specific United Nations treaties with enforcement mechanisms. The Universal Declaration is not a treaty and does not have an enforcement mechanism, although it is widely considered to be customary international law. (Humphrey 1979, 21–37; Sohn 1982, 17; Schabas 2021) So, did it become irrelevant once treaties codifying international human rights norms were adopted: namely, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) (UN General Assembly 1966a) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) (UN General Assembly 1966b), not to mention specific treaties on the rights of women and the rights of children? Not at all. The Universal Declaration continues to have several important functions. The first is that it is universal. It sets the standard for human rights even for countries that have not ratified human rights treaties, or indeed, that are not even members of the United Nations. The second is that it is comprehensive as it includes a wide variety of rights. Third, it is hortatory, urging nations to strive for higher standards of public conduct. Fourth, it is the foundation for all UN human rights treaties, and for many regional and national human rights documents as well. Fifth, it is aspirational in tone and tenor as well as in effect.

## Universal

The universality of the Universal Declaration makes its provisions applicable worldwide. The rights guaranteed by the Universal Declaration are considered to apply to every government and the rights are non-derogable. Because it is considered customary international law, it even applies to governments that have not acceded to specific human rights treaties. Some countries have acceded to human rights treaties but put limits. The human rights guaranteed in the Universal Declaration apply in all countries, everywhere, all the time.

Why is this important? It is usually the countries that have the worst human rights record that do not accede to human rights treaties. Countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, for example, have not acceded to the ICCPR or the ICESCR that have been concluded on the basis of rights contained in the Universal Declaration. (UN Office of the High Commissioner for

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<sup>2</sup> Afghanistan, Brunei, Iran, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen currently have the death penalty for apostasy.

Human Rights n.d.) These countries both have strict Islamic governments that restrict religious freedom, freedom of expression and equality for women, violating Articles 18, 19 and 7 of the Universal Declaration, respectively.

During the Cold War, the countries included in the Soviet Bloc severely restricted many rights guaranteed in the Universal Declaration. Freedom of speech was curtailed, violating Article 19. Anyone voicing dissent faced sanctions including re-education in gulags. Freedom of movement was controlled both inside and outside the country, violating Article 13. Citizens were effectively imprisoned in their own countries. Soviet Bloc countries also suppressed religious freedom and freedom of expression, banning church services, thereby violating Article 18.

North Korea continues to suppress a wide variety of human rights. Following the Korean War, North Korea was closely aligned with the Soviet Union, so it is not surprising that the state violates freedom of expression, freedom of religion and freedom of assembly, Articles 19, 18 and 20, respectively. North Korea is the most closed country in the world. Like the Soviet Union before it, North Korea does not allow its citizens to leave the country and to do so is considered treason.

For all these countries, and others like them, the Universal Declaration is the universal standard for human rights. Our post World War II world was reconstructed on the notion that culture, ideology and government structures do not give permission to a state to derogate from the rights in the Universal Declaration. There has been criticism that the Universal Declaration has a Western bias and reflects a Eurocentric perspective of human rights. However, as Michael Ignatieff, a leading human rights expert says, “Yet the human rights instruments created after 1945 were not a triumphant expression of European imperial self-confidence but a war-weary generation’s reflection on European nihilism and its consequences.” (Ignatieff 2001, 4) It was a response to the Holocaust, a horrific genocide perpetrated by a European government. It was intended to give oppressed individuals “... the civic courage to stand up when the state ordered them to do wrong.” (Ignatieff 2001, 5)

There is another situation where the universality of the Universal Declaration applies. In some Commonwealth countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, international treaties do not become part of domestic law until enacted by legislation. However, because customary international law is considered to be part of domestic law, to the extent that it is not contrary to national laws, the Universal Declaration is therefore part of the domestic law of these countries even though international treaties that the countries have acceded to are not (see *R. v. Hape* 2007).

The universal nature of the Universal Declaration is important to evangelical Christians for several reasons. The most important of these is that Evangelicals believe the Biblical narrative of Creation, found in the book of Genesis in the Bible, is universal. In the creation narrative, God creates the world and everything in it. Finally, God creates humans in his image. Thus, all humans bear the image of God, the *imago dei*, and have inherent dignity no matter their sex,

race, economic circumstances, age, disability or religion. Evangelicals therefore resonate deeply with the concept of universal, non-derogable human rights as it upholds the human dignity of all persons.

The second reason that Evangelicals support the universality of the Universal Declaration is that Article 18 strongly upholds freedom of religion. A foundational belief for evangelical Christians is that every person must have the opportunity to choose to follow Jesus as Lord. This is stated clearly in Rom. 10:9, “If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” It is this promise of eternal salvation that motivates Evangelicals to share the gospel of Jesus and encourage people to follow him. The right to make that decision is vital to Evangelicals.

## Comprehensive

The Universal Declaration safeguards a wide variety of human rights, including both those in the category of civil and political rights and those in the category of economic, social and cultural rights. As Jeremy Gunn posits, “The first draft was designed to identify the widest possible scope of potential rights, going far beyond not only those rights traditionally related to political liberties and freedom of expression that were familiar to Americans in their Bill of Rights, but to include the ‘economic and social rights’ of medical care, employment, leisure, and housing.” (Gunn 2010, 196)

Indeed, it is the wide span of human rights that gives the Universal Declaration its credibility. All states should find some rights listed that they are already mastering. Remarks by H.E. Wang Yi, State Councilor and Foreign Minister of the People’s Republic of China, at the Human Rights Council in 2021 are indicative of the Chinese government’s approach to human rights as he focuses on the progress China has made on economic rights. Regarding human rights, he says, “Among them, the rights to subsistence and development are the basic human rights of paramount importance.” (Yi 2021) At the other end of the spectrum, the US gives high value and constitutional protection to civil and political rights while refusing to recognize the right to a minimum standard of living as articulated in Article 25.

The comprehensive list of rights in the Universal Declaration allows all states to applaud their success in protecting and promoting certain rights. Conversely, all states can be subject to critique as no state fully meets all the rights guaranteed. Evangelical Christians can and do fully support the so-called first-generation rights found in Articles 3 through 23 of the Universal Declaration. (Johnson 2008, 80). They are less comfortable with the second-generation rights listed in Articles 24 and 25 as they see these as they consider them “characteristics of a humane society” (Johnson 2008, 81) rather than legitimate rights. The current Secretary General of the WEA has encouraged evangelical Christians to be informed and involved in promoting a wide variety of human rights in their own countries and internationally. (Schirrmacher 2017) So while the WEA may not advocate for all the rights enumerated in the Universal Declaration, it supports and advocates for many of them.



## Hortatory

The Universal Declaration has a hortatory function that can be used both positively and negatively. We often refer to this as “carrots” and “sticks”. In a positive sense, governments can be called on to take the moral high road in guaranteeing rights to their citizens. In a negative sense, governments can be “named and shamed” for failing to guarantee these rights.

Given that we live in a very globalized world, evangelical Christians have been able to advance many human rights in a variety of ways. First, Christians can call upon their own governments to respect human rights. The WEA has national alliances in over 140 countries and encourages them to engage in advocacy as far as possible in their contexts, and to rely on the Universal Declaration as a foundation. This allows them to raise concerns about issues such as the right to life, religious freedom, the right to family life, freedom of association, freedom of expression, the right to peaceful assembly, equality for men and women, the right to education, the right to asylum and the prohibition on slavery.

Christians have also formed many human rights organizations that work in several countries or globally to promote human rights based on the Universal Declaration. This includes organizations such as Open Doors and the International Institute for Religious Freedom, that engage in research on the extent of religious persecution. It also includes organizations such as Alliance Defending Freedom that engages in legal advocacy when a state violates religious freedom of its citizens.

Other Christian organizations, such as humanitarian aid organizations, can rely on the hortatory function of the Universal Declaration to raise rights such as the right to education (Article 26), the right to work (Article 23) and the right to an adequate standard of living (Article 25) to encourage governments to allow them to establish schools and support entrepreneurs. Providing these services is a benefit to states and also allows them to live up to international standards.

Christian groups also advocate to their own governments to encourage them to apply pressure on other governments that are violating the rights protected in the Universal Declaration. Several governments have established specific mechanisms to address religious freedom as a response. This includes the US, Italy, Europe and the UK. Each of these religious freedom ambassadors or envoys, as they are variously titled, can address concerns to other countries calling on them to uphold the guarantees in the Universal Declaration. The Universal Declaration, Articles 28 and 29, make note of the importance of a global order upholding human rights and the responsibilities we all share to promote human rights in our communities.

## Foundational

The Universal Declaration is foundational to the global understanding and legal recognition of human rights around the world. It is both the foundation for enforceable UN human rights treaties, regional treaties and for many national human rights documents, both legislative and constitutional. As Jeremy Gunn

contends, “The UDHR is the centerpiece of the modern human rights movement and has been the single most influential document in shaping the language of human rights instruments both internationally and within states.” (Gunn 2010, 197) The United Nations estimates that the Universal Declaration has been the foundation for at least 80 other human rights documents around the world. (United Nations n.d.)

The two comprehensive human rights treaties of the United Nations, the ICCPR and the ICESCR, develop the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration. “They set forth everyday rights such as the right to life, equality before the law, freedom of expression, the rights to work, social security and education.” (United Nations n.d.c) These two conventions came into force in 1976 as they took many years to draft and be ratified by the requisite number of nations. Together with the Universal Declaration, these are often referred to as the “International Bill of Rights.”

What the ICCPR and the ICESCR add, among other things, to the Universal Declaration is enforcement mechanisms. The Human Rights Committee monitors implementation of the ICCPR and the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights monitors implementation of the ICESCR. These committees are comprised of experts who hold regular reviews of countries to monitor compliance. The Human Rights Committee also has a mechanism for individuals in ratifying countries to submit particular cases for consideration by the committee.

There are eight additional UN treaties on specific issues, each with its own committee to monitor implementation. These all build on rights initially articulated in the Universal Declaration. The monitoring committees are based in both Geneva and New York. While the Universal Declaration has value in its generality and universality, the additional treaties and their monitoring mechanisms ensure that human rights has a high profile on an ongoing basis at the UN. The Charter-based Human Rights Council, and its attendant Universal Periodic Review has tended to overshadow some of the treaty-based monitoring mechanisms. In particular, the Human Rights Council (HRC) has procedures for NGO participation, particularly in the ability to make 2-minute statements directly to the HRC. However, all committee meetings are opportunities for NGO engagement by way of having parallel, side or fringe events, sometimes in cooperation with member states.

Evangelical Christian organizations have sponsored or co-sponsored events on religious freedom, humanitarian assistance, peace and security, human trafficking and the rights of women both at the UN in Geneva and in New York. They have co-sponsored events with member states, with other Christian organizations and with non-Christian, faith-based organizations. So, evangelical Christian organizations are well aware of UN mechanisms and participate in them. In addition to global treaties, the Universal Declaration has been the foundation for regional human rights treaties in Europe, Africa and the Americas. These treaties require the states that accede to the treaty to recognize and respect certain human rights guarantees. Each of these also has an enforcement mechanism. This grants people living in countries that have acceded to their regional treaty additional ways to pursue justice for rights violations.

Many countries have adopted Bills of Rights to guarantee the rights protected in the Universal Declaration. My own country of Canada, for example, adopted a Bill of Rights (Canada 1960) in 1960, following the lead of the Universal Declaration. Even though the Bill of Rights was not part of the Constitution, it was quasi-constitutional, and all legislation was required to conform to its human rights guarantees. This led to the adoption of a constitutional Charter of Rights (United Kingdom 1982) in 1982. The Charter includes an implementation clause that allows anyone who feels that their rights have been violated to apply for a remedy to a court of competent jurisdiction. This has given people in Canada significant additional tools to enforce government respect for human rights.

Some countries, like South Africa, not only adopted a Bill of Rights, (South Africa 1996, ch. 2) but also established a Constitutional Court to enforce these rights. South Africa adopted this Bill of Rights as part of the constitution after apartheid ended. The Bill of Rights along with the new court induced a legal transformation of the apartheid system.

Unfortunately, some countries have adopted constitutional guarantees respecting human rights but no enforcement mechanism. The Soviet Union, for example, had excellent constitutional guarantees of religious freedom while sanctioning anyone practicing their religious faith. The Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR 1977, ch. 7) guaranteed all the rights set out in the Universal Declaration. Articles 57 and 58 appear to give citizens access to the courts if their rights are violated. However, Articles 59 to 65 make it clear that the primary duty of all citizens is to uphold the values of the state and to defend it. In practice, these latter provisions far outweigh any possibility that a citizen could get a remedy from Soviet courts in the event of a violation of enumerated rights.

The constitution of China similarly guarantees religious freedom while sending members of religious minorities such as Uighur Muslims to re-education camps. The Constitution of the People's Republic of China, Chapter II, sets out the rights and duties of all citizens. Freedom of association is protected, as is freedom of religion. Unfortunately, the enforcement mechanism is not to an independent court but rather to the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. This is not a neutral body exercising a judicial review function but rather, an organ of the state. (Ahu 2009–2010)

The many treaties and bills of rights around the world do not guarantee that states will respect the human rights that they purport to protect. But many of them provide people whose rights have been violated with mechanisms to enforce those rights. Bills of rights, constitutional courts, human rights tribunals, regional human rights courts and the UN treaties and treaty-bodies together create a multi-layered system of protection and enforcement of human rights.

## Aspirational

The General Assembly stated that the Universal Declaration was intended to be “a common standard of achievement.” The Preamble says that human freedom is “the highest aspiration of the common people.” Therefore, in addition

to setting out a minimum standard, the Universal Declaration has provided an aspirational standard. It is not only meant for individual states to strive towards, but for the global community as well.

The Universal Declaration in 1948 was a paradigm shift in the global order. Prior to that time, international law specifically and almost exclusively focused only on state actors. But with the Universal Declaration, “For the first time, individuals – regardless of race, creed, gender, age, or any other status – were granted rights that they could use to challenge unjust state law or oppressive customary practice.” (Ignatieff 2001, 5) The idea of individuals being empowered to challenge their oppressive states paves the way for real people to argue for concrete remedies for state action in the name of international human rights. The Universal Declaration gives the foundation to do so.

Ignatieff posits that the very states that contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration were, at that time, failing to live up to the international norms they were creating. Apparently, “They thought that the Universal Declaration would remain a pious set of clichés more practiced in the breach than in the observance” (Ignatieff 2001, 6). Rather than being simply a moral statement, however, the Universal Declaration began a rights revolution. Individuals were indeed empowered to urge their states and their regions to enact meaningful human rights guarantees.

We know that no state in the world has arrived at perfect compliance with the human rights standards articulated in the Universal Declaration! Indeed, the aspiration expressed in Article 28, that “Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized” has not been met. We live in a world with wars, food insecurity, lack of basic resources and uneven economic development. Many states are not even close to the position of providing everyone an adequate standard of living (Article 25). Many of the rights are those that were given flesh in the Millennium Development Goals, (United Nations n.d.a) and now the Sustainable Development Goals. (United Nations n.d.b) These Goals mobilized the global community to assist states to achieve these goals, and in the process, meet standards set out in the Universal Declaration.

Evangelical Christians around the world aspire to live in states that promote and protect rights and freedoms of their people. They are actively engaged worldwide in providing healthcare, education, community development and humanitarian assistance to the world’s most vulnerable. The WEA has advocacy offices at the United Nations in New York and Geneva to promote human rights and well-being. The WEA supports the fulfillment of the SDGs.

## Conclusions

The Universal Declaration serves important roles in guaranteeing human rights protection around the world. It was the first global articulation of human rights. Sufficient state practice and support has elevated its provisions to become customary international law. It is therefore widely recognized as *the* statement on the scope of human rights around the world. The universal nature of the Uni-

versal Declaration allows the international community, citizens and civil society to reference it when calling on nations to fulfill human rights obligations. Many nations laud themselves for their human rights record. As the Universal Declaration is seen as the standard, it can be used to encourage states to live up to the standard. It can also be used to shame states that violate, and routinely violate the rights guaranteed.

As the standard, the Universal Declaration has been used as the minimum requirement when states adopt a bill of rights. States may decide to protect more than the rights guaranteed in the Universal Declaration, but it is difficult to protect less. Western countries tend to focus on civil and political rights and may be weaker on the protection for the rights to work, leisure and a minimum standard of living. Other countries, such as China, tend to focus on economic, social and cultural rights and may be weaker on the rights to vote and participate in politics.

Evangelical Christians look to the Universal Declaration as the minimum standard for protection for religious freedom. This is a very high value to Evangelicals. They also value other standards for human rights and work along with others towards meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. Evangelicals provide humanitarian assistance, community development, education, and peace and reconciliation, all aspiring towards “a social and international order” as articulated in Article 28 is realized.

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