



Reports

Thomas K. Johnson

Christianity and Humanitarian Islam: Together for Universal Norms and Rights?

A Contribution to the R20 Princeton Conference on the
Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 75

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International Institute
for Religious Freedom



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for Religious Freedom

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The Princeton Event

The R20 Princeton Conference on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was held in conjunction with the 75th anniversary of the adoption of the UDHR by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948. On 13–14 December 2023, international religious authorities and scholars representing the world’s major faith traditions gathered in Princeton to discuss the future of the Universal Declaration. Princeton University’s James Madison Program for American Ideals and Institutions hosted the conference, which was co-sponsored by the world’s largest Muslim organization, Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama, the Center for Shared Civilizational Values (CSCV), the R20, and the global Humanitarian Islam movement. Dr. Johnson was one of the representatives of the World Evangelical Alliance who participated in the event and signed the Princeton Declaration. During a plenary session of the Princeton event Johnson was awarded a knighthood in the Royal Order of Merit by the Sovereign and Imperial Royal House of Ghassan. The following is a lightly revised version of the speech he gave for the event.

The Speech

Dead bodies. Innumerable bodies, naked, emaciated, thrown like garbage against the side of a building. A few survivors, skinny, disoriented, standing, staring. Another pile of naked, skeleton-sized bodies, thrown against a wall.

The naïve young man who walked into the concentration camp at Dachau in 1972 was confronted with these photographs taken 27 years earlier. They demolished his comfortable worldview. He experienced two or three days of shock, in too much pain to talk. For many years afterwards, his life was punctuated by flashbacks in which those photos ran like a slide show. What happened? Why did people do this to each other? What is wrong with us? Does it help to scream, “Never again!”?

Twenty years later this young man, now a critical philosopher, privately challenged an anti-communist Russian intellectual when the Russian claimed that 100 million people had died because of Stalin. The Russian’s rebuke was kind but overpowering as he spent the evening describing the millions, including many of his own people, who died because an inhumane worldview had been implemented by a man even more inhumane.

I was that teenager, and I was that critical philosopher, teaching at a prodemocracy university in the post-Soviet world after the Berlin Wall fell.¹ As I studied religions and ideologies, I noticed two characteristics of humans. We constantly talk about what a human is, and we constantly talk about right and wrong. When someone denies these characteristics, their very denials illustrate my point.

¹ The previous paragraphs are borrowed from Thomas K. Johnson, *Human Rights: A Christian Primer*, 2nd ed. (World Evangelical Alliance, 2016), 13, 14. The book is available at <https://iirf.global/publications/books/human-rights-a-primer-for-christians/>.

Most descriptions of humanness and ethics are of two sorts: those that emphasize a particular history and those that emphasize universal Being. My distinction echoes Gotthold Lessing's distinction between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason. Even if we are not familiar with Lessing's terminology of a "great, ugly ditch" between two realms, such that "the accidental truths of history can never become the necessary truths of reason," the ditch exists in most educated minds.² We assume a fundamental difference between those things that must be true and those things that could easily be different. Roughly, the STEM fields study the necessary truths—those matters that cannot be different—whereas the humanities study the accidental truths of history, knowing that history could have unfolded in a different way and that history can be told differently.³

Among religions and ideologies, systems that base their definition of humanness exclusively on history, not on Being, are repeatedly vulnerable to becoming violent toward people with a different history. This was true of Nazis and Communists; it has been true of Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other religions. The narrative told by these groups is frequently about the superiority or moral purity of one group of people in contrast with the inferiority or greater sin of another party, class, religion, or race. An historical narrative about how a religion, race, or gender has purportedly suffered oppression, with some small groups even suffering multiple, overlapping types of oppression, places such groups in a position of moral superiority over those who caused the oppression. On the other hand, when people based their ethics on something universal, what I call Being, they have been more resistant toward violence against people of other historical identities. This is crucial in our era, as people frequently talk about identity being formed by a particular narrative, whether it is an ethnic narrative, the history of redemption, or a legacy of oppression.⁴

However, the great interpreters of ethical texts, such as the Ten Commandments, frequently bridge the gap between the truths of history and of Being in their hermeneutics. When they read the preamble to the Decalogue, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt," a history-based

² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781), "On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power," in *Lessing's Theological Writings: Selections in Translation*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 51–56.

³ Helmut Thielicke commented, "The core of the problem ... is that for Lessing the unconditioned or absolute cannot occur in history because history is an accumulation of the accidental and irrational. Unconditional truth can occur only within the bounds of reason." Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 122. The following paragraphs illustrate my claim that some of the crucial questions raised by modernity and postmodernity are best answered by reaching back to premodern sources.

⁴ An early illustration of this contrast between a religion based only on history and a religion based on both history and Being can be found in God's self-revelation to Moses, recorded in Exodus 3 of the Hebrew Bible. God first described himself to Moses as "the God of your fathers," the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, an identification of God based on the history of God's covenant. When Abraham asked how this tribally described God could deliver his people from the might of another people who also claimed to have tribal gods, God further revealed himself as "I Am." This God is Being Himself, the Ground of all other beings, including nations, political powers, and those created beings which the Egyptians had turned into idols.

ethic, they frequently add something like, “these commandments express the moral nature of God,” or “these commandments are based on the enduring relationships among people,” or “this is the written version of the natural moral law.”⁵ Both Protestant and Catholic interpreters move quickly to an ethics of Being, such that their faith and ethics are based on both history and Being, not only on an historical narrative.⁶ In doing so, they made ethics and humanness a matter of both historical faith and rational discourse, crossing Lessing’s ugly ditch that separated religious ethics from rational discourse.⁷

5 One of the most extensive examples of this pattern is Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), *Treatise on Law, Summa Theologica*, questions 90–97. His four types of law include the *eternal law*, that law which exists eternally in God’s reason and is not distinct from God Himself; using terms reminiscent of Plato or Augustine, Aquinas sometimes refers to the eternal law as the type, idea, or exemplar of law that exists in the mind of God. The *natural law* is the “participation of the eternal law in the rational creature.” The natural law is how God reveals his will through creation. “The natural law is promulgated by the very fact that God instilled it into man’s mind so as to be known by him naturally.” The natural law is so deep an imprint of the divine light on the human mind that it can be called “the light of natural reason.” The *human law* is framed by human lawgivers and given to the community for the common good. The human law is intended to promote peace and virtue, while protecting the innocent from the wicked. Finally, the *divine law* is the special revelation of God in the Old and New Testaments. A crucial element in Aquinas’s theory of law is that human law is to be derived from and evaluated primarily by the natural law, not primarily by the divine law. This is not only a rejection of theocracy; it is also a way of basing the ethics of public life on Being, not primarily on history. For more see Thomas K. Johnson, *Natural Law Ethics* (Bonn: VKW, 2005), 15–18.

6 For example, John Calvin (1509–1564), one of the founders of Protestant theology, wrote, “Now that inward law [called the natural law by Aquinas], which we have above described as written, even engraved, upon the hearts of all, in a sense asserts the very same things that are to be learned from the two Tables [the Ten Commandments].” Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia and London: Westminster Press, 1960), book II, chapter 8, section 1. One of the great European Protestant theologians of the last century, Herman Bavinck (1854–1921), referring to the Ten Commandments, could write simply, “The law is an expression of God’s being.” Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, vol. 4, (Kampen, 1918), paragraph 521. The great Princeton theologian Charles Hodge (1797–1878), referring to the laws found in the Hebrew Bible, taught, “There are laws which are founded on the nature of God. ... A second class of laws includes those which are founded on the permanent relations of men in their present state of existence. ... A third class of laws have their foundation in certain temporary relations of men or conditions of society. ... A fourth class of laws are those called positive, which derive all their authority from the explicit command of God.” Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (New York, London, and Edinburgh, 1873), 267–69. Protestant theologians such as Calvin, Bavinck and Hodge taught that salvation is by faith alone, but for them it did not follow that knowledge of right and wrong is by faith alone. As just one example, Calvin’s discussion of the natural moral law is broadly similar to that of Aquinas, so that ethics is a matter of faith and reason together, not faith alone.

7 I take it as probable that many believers belonging to several religious bodies since Lessing’s time have based their ethics and definitions of humanness almost entirely on history, neglecting the ways in which their ancestors in their faiths based these matters on both history and Being. For an assessment of this issue within Protestant theology and ethics, see Gustaf Wingren (1910–2000), *The Flight from Creation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1971).

Five years ago, I was called to engage Humanitarian Islam on behalf of the World Evangelical Alliance. My impression was that Muslims usually follow an historical worldview, not oriented to questions of Being, making Islam vulnerable to violence against people with a different history.⁸ I was wrong, at least regarding the very large Indonesian Muslim community known as Nahdlatul Ulama. They reject the notion of a caliphate, along with any similar religious doctrine that claims, based on a particular history, that a land or piece of territory belongs to a particular religion. In place of a doctrine of the caliphate, they affirm the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the centerpiece of global ethical standards. And the crucial theological step that allows a very large religious body, which is heavily based in Indonesian history and is applying a very history-oriented religion such as Islam, to promote an ethics of Being is found in their hermeneutic of historical ethical texts. Their hermeneutical method resembles that used by Protestants and Catholics to interpret the Ten Commandments and other Old Testament laws. They distinguish between **eternal norms**, valid for all people, times, and places, and **temporal norms** that were valid only in limited situations.

In the *Nusantara Manifesto* they claim, “As the majority of ‘ulamā’ [Muslim scholars] have traditionally recognized, Islamic orthodoxy consists of both transcendent (i.e., immutable) elements (*thawābit*) and contingent responses to historical reality (*mutaghayyirāt*), which may be adapted to address and reflect the ever-changing circumstances of life.”⁹

Nahdlatul Ulama states in the *Gerakan Pemuda Ansor Declaration on Humanitarian Islam*, “Religious norms may be universal and unchanging—e.g., the imperative that one strive to attain moral and spiritual perfection—or they may be ‘contingent,’ if they address a specific issue that arises within the ever-changing circumstances of time and place. As reality changes, contingent—as opposed to universal—religious norms should also change to reflect the constantly shifting circumstances of life on earth.”¹⁰

In the texts of their historically given religion, Nahdlatul Ulama is clarifying those ethical norms which are transcendent, universal, and unchanging by means of their hermeneutic. The resulting definitions of moral norms, virtue, vulnerable human goods, and human rights become similar to the other conceptions found in an ethics of Being, not only an ethics based on a particular history.¹¹

8 A leading example of this view of Islam is found in Bernard Lewis, *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Random House, 2004). Another example is Raymond Ibrahim, *Sword and Scimitar: Fourteen Centuries of War between Islam and the West* (Hachette Books, 2018). See also Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

9 *Nusantara Manifesto*, para 102, <https://www.baytarrahmah.org/media/2018/Nusantara-Manifesto.pdf>.

10 *Declaration on Humanitarian Islam*, paras 3 and 4, https://www.baytarrahmah.org/media/2017/Gerakan-Pemuda-Ansor_Declaration-on-Humanitarian-Islam.pdf.

11 For more info see Thomas K. Johnson, (World Evangelical Alliance, 2021), https://iirf.global/wp-content/uploads/Books/Humanitarian-Islam_Evangelical-Christianity_and-the-Clash-of-Civilizations.pdf.

Humanitarian Islam is crossing Lessing's ditch, the deepest philosophical issue regarding global human rights and ethical norms. Like all of humanity, the movement's leaders are rooted in a particular history, but in their historical texts they are discovering a universal ethic that includes universal human rights. Those religious and ideological movements that do not successfully cross this ditch remain more open to becoming violent with people who do not share their history.

I wish the Nahdlatul Ulama leaders had had a prominent place at the table in 1948 when the UDHR was written. Whether or not their presence might have influenced the text of the UDHR, their presence would have strengthened the religious and cultural support for such universal standards of international behavior.

Appendix: R20 Princeton Declaration



R20 Princeton Declaration

Towards a Global Consensus that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights Embodies a Civilizational Vision that the World's Diverse Peoples, Faiths, and Nations Should Strive to Fulfill



14 December 2023 • Princeton, New Jersey USA

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world....”

~ Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948)

1. Whereas on 13 – 14 December 2023 faith leaders and scholars from around the world gathered in Princeton, New Jersey to discuss the future of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in conjunction with the 75th anniversary of the UDHR's adoption by the United Nations General Assembly on 10 December 1948;
2. Whereas participants shared their wisdom and expertise concerning how best to achieve the following high-level objectives:
 - Ensuring that religion functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions, rather than problems, in the 21st century;
 - Clarifying, strengthening, and disseminating sources of inspiration and support that exist within our respective traditions for the principles articulated by the UDHR, in order to promote broader acceptance of those principles;
 - Reinterpreting and/or otherwise addressing elements of religious teachings that encourage hatred, supremacism, and violence towards those of other faiths, or none;
 - Identifying shared values and establishing reciprocity among the world's diverse peoples, cultures, and religions, by treating one another in accordance with the highest moral standards embraced by our respective traditions;
 - Preventing the weaponization of identity, whether on the basis of ethnic, religious, national, and/or ideological affiliations; and
 - Recovering ethical and spiritual resources, within our respective faith traditions, that will enable the world's diverse religions and cultures to co-exist peacefully;
3. Whereas these senior religious and academic leaders concluded that the post-World War II international consensus — represented by the UN Charter and the UDHR — embodies, reflects, and even provides a political structure for realizing the most fundamental and noble values promoted by all religions, including universal love and compassion (Arabic: *rahmah*; Hebrew: *rachamim*; Greek: *agápē*; Sanskrit: *karuṇā*), equality, honesty, justice, and peacemaking;

4. Whereas it is, therefore, eminently feasible for religions to acknowledge the principles of this international consensus and incorporate these principles within their respective teachings and worldviews;
5. Whereas there is an urgent need to apply religions' ethical and humanitarian teachings to the treatment of others, and affirm that all human beings, without exception, and not only members of one's own community, are entitled to benefit from the application of these teachings, including love, compassion, equality, honesty, justice, and peacemaking;
6. Whereas religious authorities have a moral and spiritual responsibility to ensure that their respective faiths serve as vehicles of mutual understanding and reconciliation rather than perpetuate the primordial cycle of identity-based hatred, tyranny, and violence;
7. Whereas the international consensus embodied within the UN Charter and Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides the only currently existing and viable framework for resolving identity-based conflicts — including those that occur between religions, and violence perpetrated in the name of religion;
8. Whereas the failure of global actors to respect and uphold the post-WWII international consensus as embodied in the UN Charter and UDHR framework is a primary cause of instability and conflict worldwide;
9. Whereas religious authorities — acting in service to God and humanity — should persistently and decisively work together to validate, preserve, and strengthen the post-war international consensus and demand consistency from all parties in its application;
10. Whereas it is not sufficient for these efforts to be confined to traditional religious appeals alone; they must be complemented by a deliberate, long-term strategy to mobilize the collective power of religion — including the support of people from all faiths — in a joint movement to attain this noble objective, in cooperation with governments and other civil society actors;
11. THEREFORE, we urge the United Nations General Assembly to recommend that all UN Member States distribute an electronic and/or hard copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in their national language(s), to all school children, through their respective ministries of education; and
12. We urge religious authorities of every faith and nation to marshal the power and influence of their respective spiritual traditions and communities to impact decision-making circles; halt armed conflicts raging in the Middle East, Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, and other regions of the world; develop effective mechanisms for dialogue and negotiation that may lead towards the peaceful resolution of such conflicts; and join Nahdlatul Ulama as well as the G20 Religion Forum (R20) in expanding and strengthening the global Movement for Shared Civilizational Values.

Princeton, New Jersey (USA), 14 December 2023

Signed by:

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