

# The UN Declaration of Human Rights and Christian Faith - Part 1

A fresh reading of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on this 70th anniversary of its adoption is well worth the effort.

It leads me to the conclusion that this historic document is deeply consistent with the Christian faith, rightly understood - but that Christianity's deepest congruence with the declaration may be found where the declaration itself is most reticent.

The preamble to the declaration offers four essential reasons for a "universal declaration of human rights." They are:

1. Recognition of such rights "is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world"
2. Disregard for human rights has resulted in outrageous, barbarous acts (the systematic atrocities of World War II hang over this document like a dark cloud)
3. The kind of world that would be created by respect for such rights fits with the highest of human aspirations
4. Member states have already pledged commitment to such standards when they formed the United Nations

Then the declaration enumerates an exceedingly wide range of rights "as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations." The 30 articles that follow begin by articulating the universality of human rights.

The declaration then moves to enumerate rights under the broad categories of life, liberty and security of person. Some are articulated positively, and others are framed negatively.

The rights articulated are comprehensive; they are political, procedural, judicial,

economic, residential, familial, cultural and educational.

Just one article emphasizes the duties of individuals. Another emphasizes the “social and international order” required for the full realization of these rights. Most focus on the specific rights held by human beings.

The Christian faith is congruent with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for two primary reasons, one visible in the text of the declaration and one not so visible.

There is a profound and visible congruence at the level of moral principle. The declaration articulates broad moral principles - human freedom, human dignity, human equality and the immeasurable value of human life.

Christian Scriptures in various ways affirm these principles, and Christian leaders have often (though not always) understood that such principles are constitutive of the Christian moral vision.

I will not now rehearse the sad history of times in which Christians have fallen terribly short of this vision. They are too many to name, and we ought to hang our heads in shame as we recall them.

The declaration is also congruent with Christian faith in the way it reflects some of Christianity’s deepest theological convictions.

The irony, of course, is that the declaration itself shies away from any theological claims. This dimension of congruence is entirely subterranean.

This hidden theological congruence is found, for example, in the very idea that human beings have an “inherent dignity” and “equal and inalienable rights.”

In the declaration itself, no reason is given for this claim other than the positive consequences of its embrace and the negative consequences of its abandonment.

But Christian theology needs more and can say more. It is quite able to say that

the reason that “all members of the human family” have such a moral status, and the rights that go with it, is because each person is a creation of God.

Each human being is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:27-28), reflects the grandeur of God, is sustained by the loving care of God and is made for a blessed eternal relationship with God.

The moral laws and principles offered in Scripture also demonstrate God’s care for human beings, who could have been left to our own devices but were instead given divinely inspired guidance for how human societies should be morally structured.

The prophetic demand for justice and for respect for every human life, especially the weakest and most vulnerable, is congruent with the moral law and further reflects the value of each human life in God’s sight.

Christian faith personalizes and heightens these claims by arguing that the value of human life was exalted by the incarnation of God in the human Jesus Christ.

His incarnation, deeds, teaching, death and resurrection elevated human dignity immeasurably. In Christ, God said yes to humanity.

There is another way in which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights fits with the deep convictional core of Christianity - and her sister faiths. This congruence is found in its implicit eschatology.

Hear this line from the declaration. “The advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.”

And this one. “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.”

That word “advent” cannot help but be striking to a Christian writing during the

season we call “Advent” in the Christian calendar.

Advent means “coming.” Christians celebrate the weeks before the traditional date of the birth of Jesus as “Advent.” Salvation comes into the world; humanity’s deepest hopes will soon find realization; light is coming into darkness, at last.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is an eschatological document. It dreams of the “advent of a world” of justice, freedom and peace.

What it can’t say, but believers can, is that this is the kind of world God our Creator dreamed of when God created, it’s the world every biblical moral law is intended to advance, it’s the world the prophets pointed to when they cried out for an end to all the hurt and killing, and it’s the world that Christians believe Jesus came to initiate.

It’s “tikkun olam” – the healing of the world, when every tear shall be wiped away at last, and all flesh shall dwell in peace, freedom and justice.

The declaration does not offer a theological account of how God, human beings or both will move the world from its current state to this envisioned state of freedom, justice and peace.

It “proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations” and hopes that “every individual and every organ of society ... shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights.”

Thus, human rights will be advanced by moral suasion; but also “by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance.”

In sum, the declaration hopes to reach the glorious day when human rights are honored through education and law.

A robust Christian theology will want to say more about how any success in such

human efforts will come simultaneously as a gift from God and will flow toward the eschatological future that God has in store for humanity.

*Editor's note: This is the first of a two-part reflection from David Gushee (the second part will appear tomorrow), which is the beginning of a larger series this week commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.*