

# Faith and Human Rights at the G20 Religion Forum in Indonesia

COMMENTARY

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Bali—It has been a disquieting and dangerous year in world affairs. Consequently, we owe a special debt of gratitude to the Indonesian government, whose nation’s motto is, in the Old Javanese language, “*Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*” – unity in diversity. Thanks to the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama and the counsel of the Center for Shared Civilizational Values, and in partnership with its Muslim World League cohost, Indonesia reaffirms the principle of unity in diversity with this first annual G20 Religion Forum (R20). By inviting to Bali – abounding in natural beauty and warm and kind people – citizens from around the globe and representing a variety of faiths to explore religion and our shared humanity, this forum takes a stand against the forces that would divide us into warring tribes. Our speeches, panel discussions, and conversations over coffee and meals inspire confidence that we can fortify unity by better understanding the marvelous diversity of peoples and nations, and that we can honor diversity by more fully grasping the enduring principles that make unity among peoples and nations possible and desirable.

In 1948, the UN General Assembly approved the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). Since then, human rights – the rights inherent in all human beings – have become the international language for discussing human dignity, the freedoms that belong to all individuals, and the irreducible responsibilities of citizens and governments.

The UDHR presents religious liberty as a fundamental freedom. The first article states that “[a]ll human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” Article 2 provides that no one shall be deprived, because of religion, “the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration.” And Article 18 affirms that “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

The UDHR does not ground human rights in religious faith or theological doctrine. However, by recognizing religious liberty as a basic right and fundamental freedom, the UDHR fosters respect for faith and the diversity of forms that it takes.

But all is not well with the state of human rights, and not only in countries that reconceive them as collective imperatives to justify the flagrant violation of UDHR principles. In the United States – and in other rights-protecting democracies – ideas have grown in popularity that erode understanding of, and dedication to, human rights, including the right of religious freedom. Critics on the left contend that universal claims about Western civilization and liberal democracy provide cover for colonialism and imperialism. Critics on the right maintain that invocations of universal rights serve as a pretext for imposing progressive political preferences at home and abroad. Both sets of critics make the same mistake: They refuse to distinguish between universal principles and the abuses to which those principles are subject.

Meanwhile, nationalism attracts keen interest in the United States and in other liberal democracies. This is legitimate and, in some respects, welcome. The UDHR supposes that peoples of the world will organize themselves into independent nation-states; that nation-states serve human dignity by allowing individuals united by a shared history and sense of political destiny to pursue distinctive visions of the common good; and that nation-states rightly give priority to their citizens' security, freedom, and prosperity.

But we must not forget the temptations that nation-states face. They are vulnerable to supposing that their unique traditions confer special privileges and prerogatives, giving them authority to repress dissenters at home and impose their dominion abroad.

To enable nation-states to respect human dignity in its multifarious expressions, we must preserve the domain between government and the individual. In civil society – which embraces families, neighborhoods, houses of worship, and all manner of voluntary associations – people learn to enjoy the blessings of community, care for their needs and those of others, advance shared interests, and cooperate on behalf of the common good.

At the same time, we must remain attentive to that which endures above government and the individual. Universal human-rights principles impose obligations on government and the individual as well as limits.

In recent years, the reckless disparagement of universal principles and growing confusion about the reach of nationalism have widened the partisan divide within liberal democracies. Under the influence of both, fellow citizens incline to view one another as adversaries rather than partners in a common enterprise. Acrimonious discourse becomes a way of life. Tribalism – according to which one's highest loyalty is to one's social and political group – gains ground. These simmering tensions

pose a mounting threat to that unity within diversity on which not only liberal democracy depends but also a world order that respects the sovereignty of nations and the universal rights of individuals.

Observations such as these impelled then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in the summer of 2019 to create the Commission on Unalienable Rights. The independent commission's purpose was to re-ground America's commitment to human rights in the nation's founding principles, constitutional traditions, and the obligations that the country took on in 1948 by voting in the UN General Assembly to approve the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Harvard Law School Professor Mary Ann Glendon chaired the commission. I served as the commission's executive secretary.

The 11 commissioners included members of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Mormon faiths; Democrats, Republicans, and independents; professors of law, philosophy, comparative literature, African and African American studies, and sociology; Jewish and Muslim clergy; government officials and activists. We disagreed about many matters, but we were united in the conviction that human rights were central to the American constitutional tradition, a source of political cohesiveness and national strength, an integral part of a responsible foreign policy, and the common property of humanity.

We hoped that our report would prove useful not only to Secretary Pompeo, State Department colleagues, and fellow citizens, but also to friends and partners around the world. Beyond providing insight into America's distinctive rights tradition, we wanted to invite other peoples and nations to undertake a reexamination of their traditions as we had of ours. We were confident that they, too, would find moral, philosophical, and religious resources to reaffirm the dignity of individuals and the rights human beings share.

The commission operated in the spirit of Jacques Maritain, the eminent French Catholic philosopher. Maritain wrote the introduction to a 1948 UNESCO volume, [Human Rights: Comments and Interpretations](#), which featured essays from around the world. Maritain argued that it was possible to secure agreement across borders and cultures on a small set of human rights. But, he emphasized, it was to be expected that this agreement would be reached by a multiplicity of routes: Peoples and nations would reason from within their own distinctive cultures and faiths to arrive at a common core of universal principles.

In the summer of 2020, with the unanimous endorsement of all 11 commissioners, the Commission on Unalienable Rights published its [report](#). We focused on America’s distinctive rights tradition, which has roots in biblical faith, the civic-republican school of citizenship and government, and the modern tradition of freedom. The report underscored that with its 1776 Declaration of Independence, the United States became the first nation to establish its government on the universal principles of individual freedom and equality under law. We highlighted the role that the U.S. Constitution plays in securing unalienable rights. We recognized that the barbarous institution of slavery betrayed America’s founding principles. We explored the great progress that America has made, and the pride the nation justly takes, in the quest to deliver to all citizens the equal liberty under law that the country’s founding principles promise. And we examined the place of human rights in a foreign policy worthy of a nation dedicated to freedom and democracy and possessing great power responsibilities.

The commission observes in conclusion that “respect for human rights must be cultivated, and the promotion of human rights is only one element in building the kind of societies that promote human flourishing in all its dimensions.” Another element, the UDHR stresses, is education.

While holding “that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,” the UDHR is not intended as a statement of formal legal principles. Rather, it presents “a common standard of achievement for

all peoples and all nations.” Individuals and societies, the UDHR urges, “shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms.”

Let us, gathered here in Bali for the first annual G20 Religion Forum, carry forward the work of cultivating respect for human rights through teaching and education. Inspired not least by Indonesia’s national motto of unity in diversity, let us cherish our own traditions while reaching outward to the principles that reflect our shared humanity.

Next year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of UNESCO’s report on the possibility and desirability of international agreement on human rights, as well as of the UN’s approval of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Amid resurgent threats to a world order that is grounded in respect for independent nation-states and dedication to universal human rights, these anniversaries provide an excellent occasion to convene another group of thinkers representing the world’s many and varied regions and faiths. They should write a new round of essays. By drawing on their distinctive traditions, contributors can vindicate anew the essential human dignity and those basic rights and fundamental freedoms through which peoples and nations can bring politics into better alignment with justice.

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