

Remarks at the Unveiling of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions

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Now we come to the culmination of all of today's very insightful presentations, which is the unveiling of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions. Let me give you some background about this important document. This document that we are about to unveil is itself the culmination of an eighteen-year project that began here in Montreal in 1998, at a commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the U.N.'s influential Universal Declaration of Human Rights. That declaration was adopted on December 10, 1948. It now serves as the foundation of a growing body of international human rights law. And of course that is one of my academic specialties as a law professor. But it has also become a moral beacon of hope for millions of human rights victims around the world. It is a poignant symbol of humanity's highest aspirations. No doubt future historians will view its adoption as one of the signal accomplishments of the twentieth century.

Nevertheless, the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been the subject of a number of critiques. For example, the drafters decided not to include any religious or spiritual basis for human rights, given disagreements among the governments that drafted it in matters of religion and philosophy. Furthermore, while representatives of various religions and various nonreligious belief systems did participate in drafting the Universal Declaration, the view has been expressed that it articulates a primarily Western conception of human rights. I

would also add that the Universal Declaration was adopted before we began to recognize that there are many groups that have been the subject of very blatant discrimination, including women, minorities, racial groups, the disabled, and indigenous populations, and so it did not address itself explicitly to discrimination against these groups.

So without evaluating here the merits of critiques of the Universal Declaration, it is important, we believe, to acknowledge the role that religion plays in the lives of billions of individuals around the globe, including their belief that human rights are linked with humanity's spiritual purpose in addition to the material and intellectual needs of human beings. We also believe that it is essential that religious believers affirm their own support for human rights as a fundamental aspect of our spiritual reality, especially when so many attacks on human rights, as we have heard today, have been made in the name of religion. These are some of the reasons, then, that motivated the drafting of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the World's Religions.

Just to mention a little more about this process, as I said, it began eighteen years ago under the leadership of Dr. Arvind Sharma. However, Dr. Sharma enlisted the help of many experts, some of whom you see here today. But more importantly, he made the drafting of this new document a truly consultative and collective enterprise that ultimately involved thousands of people around the world, representing many different religious traditions. And so as you know, this is actually the third of a series of global conferences that have been held here, and that have been opportunities for many individuals to contribute their own thoughts and ideas to this document. So what you will see unveiled here today is not just the product of the thinking of

these individuals on the stage, but rather of the contributions of thousands. And of course, in that respect, it represents a collective vision of human rights from the religious communities of the world.

This new declaration, moreover, is proposed not as a replacement for the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has played such an important role, but rather as a complement to it. Its purpose is to articulate a common religious perspective on human rights that emphasizes the positive contribution that religions and their followers can make to the full realization of human rights. The declaration thus reflects certain unique elements of a religious perspective on human rights. I would like to just underscore a few of these here.

First, the declaration expresses a belief in the spiritual aspect of human reality and a belief in the transcendent, and, moreover, the view that this spiritual reality of human beings is an important element of and basis for human rights. In the words of the document, “the fullest account of human life includes material well-being as well as social, cultural, communal, environmental, and *spiritual* well-being.”

Second, the declaration articulates a belief, expressed in all the world’s great religions, though often in different forms and using different metaphors, that all human beings are fundamentally united as members of a single, global human family. And a number of our speakers today underscored this common religious belief.

This belief creates a powerful incentive to arise to protect the rights of others as spiritual sisters and brothers. In the words of the declaration, “religions of the world teach the fundamental truth of the oneness of the human family.”

Third, this spiritual principle implies that we all have a moral obligation to protect our spiritual sisters and brothers – that is to say, every human being on the planet. Respect for human rights is thus *everyone's* responsibility, and not just a duty of governments. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights primarily focuses on the duties of governments. But this document specifies the duties that everyone owes to their fellow family members. And the declaration attempts to specify some of these duties in connection with each of the rights that it recognizes.

Fourth, the teaching of human unity means that all forms of religious fanaticism must be absolutely and resolutely rejected and that there is no excuse for human rights violations committed under the banner of religion. We just had a panel discussion in which we tried to analyze why there is religious fanaticism and extremism, but the fact is that religious believers must stand up resolutely against it, and this document does so. The declaration thus asserts that “the conscience of people of faith has been shaken by individuals and authorities within the world’s religions who have failed to defend human rights and have committed atrocities and violations of human rights in the name of religion, including acts of terrorism.”

Fifth, a holistic, spiritual conception of human rights also clearly requires protection of *all* aspects of human dignity, including economic, social and cultural rights alongside civil and political rights. This balanced emphasis is manifest, for example, in the common teaching of all religions that we have obligations to help the poor and the destitute and to care for the sick. Again, Dr. Shirin Ebadi emphasized this in her very moving video message this morning, as did

Dr. Cox and many of our other speakers today. So the declaration that we will unveil today reflects this emphasis on social and economic justice.

Finally, recognition of humanity's spiritual reality and the desire of everyone – and right of everyone - to seek religious truth implies that special emphasis should be given to ensuring the right of everyone to freedom of religion, freedom of thought, and freedom of conscience as an essential human right, and this is an emphasis reflected in Article 18 of the declaration. This right is especially relevant today, given the efforts by some governments to suppress religious freedom, and in particular the religious freedom of certain communities.

The declaration further affirms the importance of freedom of opinion and expression in Article 19, including in particular providing that “expression” “includes not only the language one speaks, but also the food one eats and the clothes one wears, as well as prayer and other forms of religious expression.” Again, these provisions of the declaration are directly relevant to many human rights-related issues today involving government policies that adversely affect religious believers. In fact, you will find that many provisions of the declaration address issues that are making the news today.

As I have noted, this declaration is the result of an eighteen-year collaborative effort involving representatives of many faiths. The project, in its broad outlines, has won the endorsement of many influential leaders of thought and conscience, including five Nobel Peace Prize laureates, such as Dr. Shirin Ebadi. Those who have drafted the declaration have attempted to articulate a vision of human rights that draws on the common foundational ethical teachings that all the world religions share, while respecting differences of opinion among many of their followers

regarding how to implement specific rights. The declaration seeks to integrate the highest ideals of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights with these common teachings of the world's religions. We propose it to you now in the hope that it will encourage continued efforts by religious believers to arise to promote and protect the human rights of every member of the human family.