



The Search for Universal Values Amidst a Resurgence of Tribalism

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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. With the leadership of Nahdlatul Ulama, 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 R20 summit. 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 human rights, the R20 Summit takes a stand against the forces that would divide humanity into warring tribes. This initiative inspires 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 affirms 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 the diversity of faiths.



But all is not well with the human rights, and not only in countries that routinely violate them. 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 universal-rights claims 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 they have been 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; and that nation-states rightly give priority to providing their citizens security, prosperity, and freedom.

But we must not forget the temptations that nation-states face. They are vulnerable to supposing that their unique traditions elevate them above the rest of the humanity, giving them authority to repress dissenters at home and bring other peoples under their dominion.

To enable nation-states to respect human dignity in its multifarious expressions, we must remain mindful of the domain between government and the individual and that which endures above government and the individual. Between government and the individual stands civil society – families, neighborhoods, communities, houses of worship, and all manner of voluntary associations. In these various forms of community, people learn to care for their needs and those of others, advance shared interests, and cooperate on behalf of the common good. Enduring above government are those universal principles – captured in our era in the language of human rights – that limit the state to protect individual freedom and equality under law.

Both the indiscriminate disparagement of universal principles and confusions about nationalism widen the partisan divide within liberal democracies. Fellow citizens incline to view one another as adversaries rather than partners in 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. This poses a mounting threat to that unity within diversity on which not only liberal democracy depends but on which also rests 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 reground America's commitment to human right 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 Jews, Christians, Muslims, and Mormons; 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. We were confident that they, too, would find moral, philosophical, and religious resources to affirm the dignity of individuals and the rights human beings share.

The commission operated in the spirit of Jacques Maritain, the eminent French Catholic philosopher. Contributing to the post-World War II movement to draft the UDHR, Maritain wrote an Introduction to [Human Rights: Comments and Interpretations](#). Commissioned by UNESCO, this 1948 collection of essays featured thinkers from many countries and a variety of faiths. Maritain's introduction discussed the unprecedented enterprise and summarized two crucial implications of the essays. First, it was possible, Maritain argued, to secure agreement across borders and cultures on a small set of human rights. Second, 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 emphasized that with its 1776 Declaration of Independence, the United States became the first nation to found 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 cruel 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 its founding principles promise. And we examined the place of human rights in a responsible foreign policy that begins with securing freedom and prosperity at home.

With its embrace in 1948 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the United States incorporated into the nation's own rights tradition the first attempt in history to obtain worldwide agreement on universal political principles. We stressed in the report that the UDHR was "written and understood as an interlocking set of integrated principles." Accordingly, the social and economic rights which, according to the UDHR, states must provide in "accordance with their organization and resources" must be harmonized with the categorical promises and prohibitions the UDHR sets forth concerning civil and political rights.

The report's conclusion observes 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." The UDHR connects the cultivation of respect for human rights to education. While holding "that human rights should be protected by the rule of law," the UDHR is not itself 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 R20 Summit, carry forward that work. Inspired by Indonesia's national motto of unity within diversity, let us proceed from within our own traditions while reaching outward to the principles that reflect our shared humanity.

Next year marks the 75th anniversary of both UNESCO's report on the possibility and desirability of international agreement on human rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These anniversaries provide an excellent occasion to convene another group of thinkers representing the world's many and varied regions and faiths to write a new round of essays on human rights. By drawing on their distinctive traditions, contributors can – amid resurgent threats to a world order grounded in national sovereignty and human rights – vindicate anew that essential human dignity and those basic rights and fundamental freedoms through which we bring politics into line with justice.