

The Cry for Human Rights

In 1945, out of the ashes of World War II, forty-eight nations formed the United Nations. Still reeling from the genocidal atrocities of Nazi Germany and the savage treatment of civilians and prisoners of war by Imperial Japan, human rights came to the top of the world agenda. And so in 1948 the newly-formed United Nations released the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document was the first global expression of fundamental human rights to be universally protected.

Australia played an active role in developing the UDHR and the international human rights treaties and conventions that followed. While Australia does not have a charter or bill of human rights of its own, like many other nations, it is a party to seven major international human rights treaties.

Seventy years on, there is no doubt that the UDHR has helped to reduce violent extremism and discrimination in the world. But what really is the inspiration behind the UDHR?

Influenced by a Judeo-Christian Worldview

The UDHR is a secular document with no mention of God. Even so, it uses terms and concepts that strongly imply that humans are more than just another animal or a cosmic accident. Its Preamble begins with the affirmation that the *“recognition of the inherent dignity, of the equal and inalienable rights, of all members of the human family, is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world ...”*. The Preamble also goes on to state that *“the peoples of the United Nations have ... reaffirmed their faith ... in the dignity and worth of the human person ...”* (underscores added)

The first of the thirty articles states that *“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.”* Articles 22 and 23 also speak of human dignity.

Professor Louis Henkin, widely acknowledged as one of the most influential scholars on international law, asks two insightful questions: *“Is ‘inherent dignity’ the concept that lies at the heart of the idea of human rights in the Declaration? ... Is it possible to define human dignity without any reference to man in the image of God?”*



If indeed, as Article 1 states, *“all human beings ... are endowed with reason and conscience”* who is the Endower? And if all human beings have a *“conscience”* where did that moral sense of what is right and wrong come from?

In 1982, the Iranian representative to the United Nations made the astute observation that the UDHR was *“a secular understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition”*. Undeniably the language of the UDHR echoes the 1776 United States Declaration of Independence which affirmed as self-evident that *“all men are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights.”* The UDHR does not, however, mention God.

The idea that all human beings are equal may seem self-evident to us who live in a society heavily impacted by the Judeo-Christian belief system. But we see today how other civilisations, such as the

Islamic world, have not readily accepted the UDHR. In 1948 Saudi Arabia abstained from the ratification vote claiming that it violated Islamic Sharia law. In the year 2000 the members of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference produced an alternate document, the Cairo Declaration of Human Rights in Islam, which says that people have *“freedom and right to a dignified life in accordance with the Islamic Sharia.”* Here we must take careful note that a *“dignified life”* under Islamic Sharia is very different from the *“inherent dignity”* of every human being.

The Origin of Human Rights

Australian atheist, Chris Berg, states that *“many modern human rights activists seem to believe that human rights sprang forth, full-bodied ... in United Nations treaties in the mid-20th century. Nothing could be further from the truth. The idea of human rights was founded centuries ago on Christian assumptions, advanced by Biblical argument, and advocated by theologians. Modern supporters of human rights have merely picked up a set of well-refined ethical and moral arguments.”*

The Rev Dr John Stott, an eminent modern-day theologian, goes even further back asserting that *“the origin of human rights is creation. Man has never acquired them. Nor has any government or other authority conferred them. Man has had them from the beginning. He received them with his life from the hand of his Maker. They are inherent in his creation. They have been bestowed on him by his Creator ... Thus all human rights are at base the right to be human, and so to enjoy the dignity of having been created in God’s image and of possessing in consequence unique relationships to God Himself, to our fellow human beings and to the material world. Christians have something important to add to this, namely that our Creator has also redeemed or recreated us, at great personal cost, through the incarnation and atonement of His Son. And the*

costliness of God's redeeming work reinforces the sense of human worth which His creation has already given us." (underscores added)

John Stott continues "Here then is a Christian perspective on human rights. First, we affirm human dignity. Because human beings are created in God's image to know Him, serve one another and be stewards of the earth, therefore they must be respected. Secondly, we affirm human equality. Because human beings have all been made in the same image by the same Creator, therefore we must ... behave without partiality to all."

From this we see that our dignity and worth as human beings are not arbitrarily declared by the United Nations. Similarly our human rights are not based on the subjective feelings of our fickle fellow humans. Our human rights and dignity and worth are inextricably linked to the reality that we are created in the image of a loving God.

Father God, thank You for the good that the United Nations has achieved through its Universal Declaration of Human Rights. But open our eyes to see that this is only because it echoes the Judeo-Christian belief system which shaped Western civilisation. For it is because You created humanity in the beginning in Your image and likeness that every man, woman and child has inherent dignity and value. And You marvellously ratified this when You sent Your Son to earth to die for the sins of the entire human race once and for all. Awaken our society to the truth that Western civilisation flourished only because of this truth. Help us not to place our ultimate trust in human institutions such as the United Nations but in You the Loving Creator and Sustainer of the Universe. In the Name of Jesus. Amen

About 'Image of God' Leaflets

In the Bible we read that God "*created man in His own image*" (Genesis 1:27). Many maintain that all human history revolves around this truth. The Judeo-Christian belief in the unique dignity of human beings is at the very foundation of Western civilisation.

The 2010 Canberra Declaration therefore states:

"We believe that all human life, being made in the image of God, has intrinsic and equal value from conception to life's natural end."

'Image of God' leaflets relate the doctrine of humanity as created in the image of God to various issues we face in Australia today.

The 21 leaflets in SERIES ONE are dedicated to Sophie Scholl who was martyred at the age of 21 in World War II for writing and distributing leaflets.

You can download other 'Image of God' leaflets at The Canberra Declaration website.

Please:

READ & SIGN

The Canberra Declaration
to Protect

- ***Religious Freedom***
- ***Marriage and Family and***
- ***Human Life***
in Australia

Website: www.canberradeclaration.org.au

Email: info@canberradeclaration.org.au

© Canberra Declaration

Date last modified: 4 October 2017

SERIES ONE

Leaflet 19

THE UNITED NATIONS Universal Declaration of Human Rights



and the Image of God