

Religion, Politics and Human Rights. A Christian Perspective on Human Rights

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Abstract

Human rights have their roots in liberalism and have become increasingly important in international relations over the last seventy to eighty years. Religious individuals and movements have become much more active in social and political life during the same period, but especially in the last 35 years. Religion now plays an active role in society in many countries and is a determining factor in international relations. At present, it is impossible to ignore religion as a factor in political life, whether it takes the form of religious terrorism, religious freedom or religious movements. The study explores the relationship between religion, politics and human rights from a Christian perspective. It emphasises that Christian teaching promotes values such as love, equality and respect for life, thus supporting the rights and dignity of every individual. Throughout history, the Church and Christian movements have played an important role in promoting civil rights and social justice, contributing to the affirmation of fundamental freedoms. At the same time, the text analyses the tensions and challenges that have arisen between religious interpretations and human rights principles, as well as the role of the state in maintaining a balance between them. In the context of the 21st century, Christianity continues to address new global challenges, promoting interreligious and ecumenical dialogue for the respect of universal human values. Finally, the text highlights the importance of collaboration between religion and politics in order to support and protect human rights in a harmonious manner.

Keywords: Christianity, human rights, freedoms, politics, religion.

JEL Classification: K38

1. Introduction

This year marks the 77th anniversary of the adoption, on 10 December 1948, by the then 58 member states of the UN General Assembly, of *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The subject of human rights, a highly debated topic in contemporary politics, has become a common language and a basic framework for international relations and dialogue.²

The concept of human rights has crystallised with the evolution of public freedoms, which have involved not only their formulation, but also their legal guarantee and protection.

The fundamental rights and freedoms of human beings are understood to be those subjective rights and freedoms belonging to citizens.³ These fundamental rights

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² †Daniel Ciobotea, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, *Human Rights – Some Theological Considerations*, in "The Science of Salvation. The Mystical and Missionary Vocation of Theology," ed. Basilica, Bucharest, 2014, p. 122; Cristina Elena Popa Tache, Catalin-Silviu Sararu, „New Transdisciplinary Directions in International Law?”, *Lex Humana*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2023: 86-109, p. 89.

³ Ion Muraru and Elena-Simina Tănăsescu, *Constitutional Law and Political Institutions*, 11th edition, vol. 1, ed. All Beck, Bucharest, 2003, p. 211

and freedoms – guaranteed by the Constitution and national and international laws – are essential for life, liberty, dignity and, of course, the free development of the human personality. We can rightly say here that in a country where the rights and freedoms of citizens are systematically violated, they are depersonalised, unable to develop this human side of themselves.

Human rights are inherent and inalienable rights of every person, defining the human condition in a civilised society. Man, as a rational being, born free, as the measure of all things, represents the supreme value on which any politically organised society under the rule of law should focus.

Although some authors refer to *the Magna Carta Libertatum* (1215) as the beginning of human rights, it should be noted that this document refers to the protection of the rights of "free" people, the privileged members of society, i.e. the military and clerical aristocracy, who claimed and enforced respect for the rights violated by their Sovereign. There can be no talk of equality for all people before the law until the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, adopted in 1789 by the French Constituent Assembly, in which "man" was taken "in the most general sense of human being. Of course, this Declaration did not exclude women from its scope, but it ignored – according to Romanian jurist Irina M. Zlătescu – the problems posed by discrimination between men and women, which was so real at that time... In France, it was not until the Liberation in 1944 and the Constitution of the Fourth French Republic that women obtained the right to vote, a century after the adoption of so-called universal suffrage by the Revolution of 1848.⁴

The first document to clearly and precisely define human rights and freedoms was *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, adopted and proclaimed by the UN General Assembly through Resolution 2171 (III) on 10 December 1948. Fundamental rights were reiterated and supplemented by *the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, adopted in Rome on 4 November 1950 and entered into force on 3 September 1953 upon signature by the governments of the member countries of the Council of Europe.

The 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that the rights and freedoms proclaimed therein cannot be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations. It has the merit of being a document that binds the signatory states. Of course, since 1948 there have been countless cases of flagrant human rights violations. But it is equally true that various international organisations and democratic states, members of the UN, have exerted and continue to exert pressure on states that have violated and continue to violate human rights.⁵

For example, we are currently witnessing serious human rights violations in the Gaza Strip. A UN report from November 2024 shows that of the thousands of verified deaths in the war that began in October 2023, 70% are Palestinian women and children. UN experts believe that many of these deaths could fall into categories such as war crimes, crimes against humanity or even genocide. At the same time, in a resolution adopted in August 2025, the European Parliament strongly condemns the Israeli

⁴ Irina M. Zlătescu, Radu C. Demetrescu, *From the History of Human Rights*, IRDO Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, p. 14.

⁵ Vasile Răducă, *From Human Rights to Religious Rights*, in "Theological Studies" series II, year LII, no. 1-2, January-June 2000, p. 65.

government's blockade on humanitarian aid, electricity, fuel and water in Gaza, depriving people of goods that are essential for their survival, which constitutes a war crime under international law, and recalls that the International Court of Justice (ICJ), in its order of 28 March 2024, stated that genocide can also be committed by withholding humanitarian assistance.⁶

One thing is certain, both for the Gaza Strip and for some countries where serious human rights violations occur: the violation of these rights clearly leads to humanitarian and economic crises. Human rights violations often lead to economic crisis due to reduced productivity, loss of labour, discouragement of investment and undermining of trust in institutions. When fundamental rights are violated, the economy suffers in the long term due to social instability, widespread corruption and ine e policies.

This serious violation of human rights can be considered a crime against humanity, as we are talking here about both the large number of anti-human actions and the large number of people against whom they were directed. A contemporary author, Jacques Milbank, observes that the accusation of crimes against humanity is "the most radical" because it assumes that the victims are fully human, regardless of their ethnicity or religion.⁷

It should also be noted that there are two main factors involved in respecting human rights: religion and politics. Although seemingly contradictory concepts, religion and politics are, according to author Silviu Rogobete, constitutive dimensions of both human identity and social life. As fundamental elements of human experience, they are intrinsically interdependent and interconnected.⁸ Even though some modern philosophers, including Nietzsche, Marx and Freud, believe that religion will be eliminated over time, and even though some totalitarian atheist regimes of the 20th century were opposed to religious manifestations, religion and politics have been and remain essential elements of human existence, and the dynamics between them are realities that cannot be ignored. The same author, quoting one of the great theorists of the contemporary religious phenomenon, Peter Berger, says: "Those who neglect religion in their research on contemporary world affairs do so at enormous risk [...] religion is important, relevant, and a significant social, economic, and political force that deserves and must be studied."⁹

2. Religion and human rights

The question has been and continues to be asked whether "human rights" are an exclusive discovery of civil society and whether religion, in this case Christianity, has contributed to their development. From the outset, we must mention that the Christian

⁶ See the resolution at https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-10-2025-0373_RO.html, accessed on 04.11.2025.

⁷ Jacques Milbank, *The Last Christian Settlement: A Defence and Critique*, in Debate with Samuel Moyn. In "Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered". Edited by Sarah Shortall and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020, p. 32.

⁸ Silviu Rogobete, *Religion and Politics: Interpretative Paradigms*, in Vasile Boari (editor), *Religion and Politics*, Ed. European Institute, Iași, 2016, p. 15.

⁹ Peter L. Berger, *The desecularisation of the world; Resurgent religion and world politics*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999, p. 18, apud. Silviu Rogobete, *Religion and politics: interpretative paradigms*, in Vasile Boari (editor), *Religion and Politics*, Ed. European Institute, Iași, 2016, p. 15.

Churches were not involved in the development of the various Declarations, but they are no strangers to the formation of a mindset in which such documents can emerge. Since religious faith and its sources exert a direct influence on fundamental moral references, Christianity has had an undeniable influence on the formulation of human rights declarations, even if the Churches, having only an indirect influence on concrete moral judgements, could not be directly involved in the drafting of these declarations.¹⁰

Human rights and religions are two widespread categories of knowledge organisation in the world. Although they are frequently associated and interconnected, both their meanings and the relationship between them are complex and often contested. Any attempt to debate the two topics will reveal significant nuances, contradictions and misunderstandings.

The first step in transforming rights into human rights was Hugo Grotius' book, *De iure belli ac pacis* (On the Rights of War and Peace) (1625), which formulated natural rights without a divine or religious basis.¹¹

In the 20th century, the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights, which was responsible for drafting the 1948 *Declaration*, included people of different religious denominations, as well as representatives from countries with diverse religious traditions and experts from a wide range of cultural and religious backgrounds. However, *the Declaration* does not contain any reflection on any religious basis in its foundation, but respect for freedom of religious belief and all rights associated with it were included in it.

Prior to *the Declaration*, there were long-standing relationships between religions and human rights, particularly debates concerning natural law and Christianity. Certainly, many prominent thinkers in the Christian tradition were part of the path towards human rights. However, Christianity was also a source of criticism for attempting to construct a list of rights that did not necessarily have a divine basis, not to mention the relative lack of response from the Vatican to the Declaration until the arrival of Pope John XXIII (1958-1963), who gave greater importance and relevance to human rights as part of the foundation of his discourse in the complex times in which he lived.¹²

Although inspired by the Gospel, secular consciousness understood the dignity of the human person, but Christian churches played no official role in the drafting of *the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. The Eastern Churches were under totalitarian regimes and unable to communicate their point of view, while the Roman Catholic Church was very reticent from the outset, because the declarations already known before 1948 came from Protestant circles (those in England and America) or Masonic circles (that of the French Revolution). After the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), convened by Pope John XXIII, the Roman Catholic Church became actively involved in the movement to defend human rights, more in its capacity as a state than as a church. As a state and member of the UN, the Roman Catholic Church attempted to introduce

¹⁰ Vasile Răducă, *From Human Rights...*, p. 65.

¹¹ Andrew Lloyd Williams, *Religion and International Relations Theory: The Case of "New" Historiography of Human Rights*, Department of Philanthropic Studies, IUPUI, Indianapolis, IN 46202, USA, *Religions*, 2022, 13(1), 39; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13010039>.

¹² Rafael Ruiz Andrés, *Human Rights and Religions: An Overview on a Controversial Relationship*, Department of Applied Sociology, Faculty of Political Sciences and Sociology, Complutense University of Madrid, 28223 Pozuelo de Alarcón, Spain, *Religions*, 2023, 14(11), 1343; <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14111343>.

more prominent Christian elements into the international documents that followed the 1948 Declaration. Thus, at the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in Helsinki (1973-1975), it insisted on the inclusion in the final declaration adopted by all heads of state and government of the recognition and guarantee by all states and governments of religious rights. It was not until 1989, at the Bern Conference, that it succeeded in introducing two religious rights, namely: a) religion must not be a reason for discrimination in access to education; and b) religious communities must be given the right to establish individual and collective contacts within and outside the country.¹³

A primary contribution of Christianity to the affirmation of human dignity is the belief that man is not a product of nature. He was created with special care by God, as master of nature and not as its slave or imitator. Human rights are not based solely on the fact that all people have the same nature, nor on the socio-cultural context in which man lives, but are based in particular on his relationship with God. If man is created in the image of God, he must, in his orientations, thoughts and deeds, activate this quality towards other people, without distinction. Each human person is unique, irreplaceable, destined for a transcendent life and not just a unit within a social entity, and this gives them inestimable value. Therefore, the dignity of being made in the image of God confers on man privileges (before nature), rights, but also obligations.

The freedom of the human being, like the other aspects of their dignity, has been deduced not only exclusively from nature, nor exclusively from divine authority, but also from the relationship of communion, both with the world and with the divine, a relationship in which man was created and restored as a personal, thinking being, free and capable of voluntary relationships with the environment, personal or impersonal.¹⁴

The Church, a divine-human institution, therefore bases its respect for human rights *on theology* (man, as a species, was created by one and the same God and did not appear spontaneously and by chance), *ontology* (all people are descendants of a primordial couple, created by God), *soteriological and ecclesial* (all people are redeemed by Christ and incorporated into His mystical Body through the same grace) and *eschatological* (all human behaviour towards one's fellow human beings determines the quality of the resurrection and eternity of human life).

In the Christian view, human existence is, par excellence, prospective, and its finality is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, in turn, is not a mere ideal, but a clear reality confirmed by Jesus Christ Himself, as God who became Man, through what He showed and taught us, but especially through His Resurrection from the dead. The goal of man becomes clear, which is to attain this Kingdom, and therefore everything that man accomplishes in his earthly existence, the value of everything he does here on earth, influences whether or not he will attain this Kingdom. Yes, man has a right to life. But Christians know that this right to life is not limited to this life alone, but also to eternal life. Eternity or everlasting life is a right of man, which belongs to his nature; it is an ontological given and not just an aspiration. The quality of this right is determined by the way in which each person has respected both the rights of his fellow human beings and his own rights, with the aim of preparing himself for the eternity for which he was

¹³ Jean-François Six, *Religion, Église et Droits de L'homme*, Desclée de Brouwer, 1991, pp. 77-78.

¹⁴ See Epistle to the Galatians V,13, where St. Paul says: "For you, brothers, have been called to freedom, on condition that you do not use your freedom as an opportunity to serve the flesh, but serve one another through love."

created. The right to eternal life is, in the Christian view, truly a fundamental human right, a right given to man at creation, and therefore does not need to be recognised by any human institution. The intensity with which Christians live their hope in eternal life is what determines the attention and value they give to life and the rights of their fellow human beings. In fact, we cannot really speak of fellow human beings unless we accept the common origin of humankind.¹⁵

Other rights – fundamental and civil – such as the right to life, liberty, security of person, equality, freedom of thought and conscience, freedom of opinion (Articles 3, 18, 19) of the Universal Declaration, the right to work, to practise any religion and others, cannot obstruct man's right to salvation, to eternal life. Moreover, if all other rights are fundamental and absolute, I do not understand why man should respect and fight for rights that are called absolute, but which are exhausted in a relative existence that ends with physical death.

Christian philosopher Jacques Maritain, one of those who contributed to the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, said: "The secular conscience has understood the dignity of the human person, under the impetus of the Gospel, which is often overlooked. It has understood that the person, although part of the State, transcends the State through the inviolable mystery of spiritual freedom and through the, his call to absolute goodness. The *raison d'être* of the State is to help achieve these goods and a truly human life..."¹⁶

In general, theological discourse distinguishes between the individual and the person. The individual (*ἀντονομ* in Greek or *individuus* in Latin) refers to the isolated, solitary, autonomous, self-sufficient, selfish human subject, turned in on itself. On the contrary, the person (*πρόσωπον* or *persona*) is the human being who relates, who is in a state of communion, that is, the human being who is in solidarity with others, oriented towards his fellow human beings. Where does this theological thinking about the person come from? The theological foundation of human dignity is given by the fact that every human being in relationship or communion with his fellow human beings is an image of the Triune God. Divine unity is relational, dynamic, interpersonal. We humans are icons or images of the Holy Trinity and we are called to represent or reproduce on earth the communion within the bosom of the Godhead (cf. John XVII, 21). The bond between the persons of the Holy Trinity thus constitutes for us the model and source of every human community, and the divine Persons represent the model of every human person.

This belief in a personal or, rather, inter-personal God, identified by St John the Evangelist with love itself¹⁷, leads us to oppose any form of exploitation, discrimination or social injustice because, as a contemporary theologian has said, "in our struggle for human rights, we act in the name of the Holy Trinity."¹⁸

The subsequent proclamation of human rights by civil institutions would not have been possible without the steadfast work of the Church on the conscience of its children, in the spirit of its message to the world. Whether modern man wants to accept

¹⁵ Vasile Răducă, *The Christian Perspective on Human Rights*, in Nicolae Răzvan Stan (editor), "The Orthodox Church and Human Rights – Paradigms, Foundations, Implications," Ed. Universul Juridic, Bucharest, 2010, p. 204.

¹⁶ Vasile Răducă, *The Christian Perspective....* p. 205, taken from Jacques Maritain, *L'inspiration Evangélique et conscience profane*, en "Christianisme et démocratie", Desclée de Brouwer, p. 53.

¹⁷ Cf. 1 John IV, 16: "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him."

¹⁸ Kallistos Ware, *L'ille au-della du monde*, Ed. du Cerf, 2005, p. 52.

it or not, "the proclamation of human rights could only be achieved in a world that had been imbued with an awareness of the infinite value of the human soul."¹⁹

Thus, from a theological point of view, human destiny, the vocation of the human person, is fulfilled in communion, in society, at all levels: family, group, ethnicity, nation, etc. In this case, it should be emphasised that the 1948 Declaration recognises not only individual rights, but also social rights within different human communities.

However, defining the human person as a being of solidarity, oriented towards others, leads us to talk about human rights, dissociating them from human duties or responsibilities. The first article of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* states that all human beings, born free and equal in dignity and rights, must behave towards one another "in a spirit of brotherhood". And Article 29 of the same Declaration states that "everyone has duties to the community, since only within it can the free and full development of his personality be achieved." In fact, the words "right" (from Latin *directus*) and "just" (Latin *justus*) are semantically related. Right is what is just. And justice refers to the ideal of a fair distribution of the advantages we have in social life and the duties it imposes, in other words, to give everyone their due. Thus, the reciprocity between rights and duties appears to be essential for society, constituting one of the most important virtues of contemporary society.²⁰

This tension between individual human rights and social and community duties can be overcome if these fundamental rights are brought into line with moral and spiritual values. In other words, formal rights must be complemented by the moral and spiritual dimension of human rights.

Of course, theology offers the world a vision of man as a free subject, capable of making free decisions, a vision closely linked to the dignity attributed to each person. However, the dignity of human freedom is conditioned by its ethical foundation, namely responsibility. From this point of view, the rights of the individual are corroborated by those of one's neighbour. Respect for one's neighbour must be at least equivalent to that owed to oneself. (cf. Matthew XXII, 39: "*Love your neighbour as yourself*"). For it is not enough "to be together" to be a true person in the theological sense. In order to actualise the image of the Trinity, one must live in solidarity, common commitment, self-giving or mutual giving.

Especially now, when wars followed by economic crises have become a worrying phenomenon, it is necessary that human dignity be even more defended from the humiliation that derives from poverty, unemployment, exploitation, social injustice, hunger and suffering. Because, from a Christian perspective, life is not just a "right", but more than that, it is a "gift" from God (cf. John 10:10: "*I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*"). A precious gift that must be defended, preserved and cultivated in relationships, in communion and in society. In this sense, Christian churches base their social thinking on the Gospel of Christ's love for all people, a love that also becomes the criterion for evaluating human life in history.²¹

The Church emphasises both human rights and, above all, the content of human

¹⁹ Vasile Răduică, *De la Drepturile omului...*, p. 68

²⁰ †Daniel Ciobotea, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, *Human Rights – Some Theological Considerations...*, p. 124.

²¹ See Matthew XXV, 31-46.

freedom, strongly affirming the crucial role of moral and spiritual values in contemporary society. For authentic spirituality is precisely the profound connection between freedom, love and responsibility in relation to God and to people.

A wise man of our time, Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel, noted that at the end of the 20th century, human rights were spoken of as a modern, secular religion. According to him, it would have a sacred aspect in the sense that what touches the humanity of our being is sacred, therefore inviolable. Moreover, he recalled that religious fanaticism in the Middle Ages was followed by political fanaticism. Totalitarian ideologies replaced belief in God for a long time and humiliated human beings. However, every human being has the right to dignity. To violate this right is to humiliate man, and in the eyes of ancient philosophers, humiliation is a crime comparable to death.²²

Christianity brings a new meaning to human rights, in the sense that it shows that they must not be respected out of fear of coercion or fear of national or international authorities, but because of a higher understanding of man. Once you are convinced that your vocation and that of others is fulfilled in eternity, once you are convinced that the quality of your deeds here, including respect for your neighbour, will determine the quality of your own eternity, you will truly respect the rights of those with whom you travel here on earth on the road to eternity.

However, Christianity brings a new meaning to human rights, namely responsibility. From the message of the Gospel, we understand rights as responsibility and that they are never separate from responsibility. Man has responsibility in everything he must receive and must be responsible in everything he must offer. Knowing both rights and responsibilities will maintain the balance between use and abuse in claiming and granting or enforcing human rights.²³

3. Conclusions

The importance of the spiritual dimension of human rights, based on the universal supreme values of human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity, must be clearly emphasised here. The Church plays an important role in cultivating respect for human dignity, and dialogue between the Church and State institutions is a valuable resource for creating a climate conducive to respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms. Love for one's neighbour is a moral duty which, in legal terms, becomes a rule or obligation, since human beings must be both free and responsible.

At the same time, "the emphasis is not only on the support of religions in spreading fundamental rights in the world, but also on the ability of religions to accept these rights themselves as a call for self-criticism. To the extent that communities of believers demonstrate their ability to transform themselves in the light of human rights, their internal coherence confirms the worldly relevance of their action in this area."²⁴

²² Elie Wiesel, *Against Indifference*, apud. Nicolae Dură, *Fundamental Human Rights and Freedoms and Their Legal Protection. The Right to Religion and Religious Freedom*, in *Ortodoxia*, year LVI, no. 3-4 July-December, 2005, p. 29.

²³ Vasile Răducă, *The Christian Perspective...*, p. 208

²⁴ Constantin Rus, *Religion in European human rights jurisprudence*, in Nicolae Răzvan Stan (Editor), "The Orthodox Church and human rights: paradigms, foundations, implications", Ed. Universul Juridic, Bucharest, 2010, p. 312.

Therefore, respect for human rights must be ensured in all areas of activity, and governing bodies must take real measures to ensure that they are applied properly and with greater rigour and legal thinking. Frequent changes to state laws due to political disagreements only serve to hinder the protection of people's fundamental rights and freedoms, often creating chaos and despair.

Fundamental rights occupy an important place in our legal systems, both on the basis of domestic law standards and international law standards. It is therefore extremely useful to take stock and compare the globalisation of our world with the confrontation between companies and our legal systems.

Without a doubt, human rights will remain one of humanity's major issues. They will continue to be a universal challenge that no civilisation, state or group can ignore. In the 21st century, they must serve as a counterweight to the dangerous "fanaticism of particularity" that rejects the "priority of humanity" as central values for the peaceful coexistence of peoples and civilisations. Many historical obstacles to human rights have been removed, and many misunderstandings have been clarified. Of course, new attacks on human rights have emerged from postmodernism, multiculturalism, religious fundamentalism and globalisation. But the universality of human rights will withstand all these attacks. It seems that the process of universalising human rights is irreversible, and even if it will be a long process, the struggle for human rights has no end. In any case, I do not believe that we could ever imagine a future world without human rights.

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