Integral Research (Peer-reviewed, Open Access & Indexed Multidisciplinary Journal) ISSN: 3048-5991
Journal home page: https://integralresearch.in/, Vol. 02, No. 05, May. 2025

Religious Freedom, Democracy and Human Dignity

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Abstract

Christian academics developed fundamental theories on people and their inalienable rights as members of the human race over many centuries. More recently, the growing human rights movement has benefited greatly from the contributions of Christian academics and activists, who have been undervalued. From the periphery of both international politics and theology, they have contributed to the advancement of human rights. The idea of human rights has a rich philosophical history that extends well beyond Christianity and predates the rise of Christianity. However, Christians have greatly influenced human rights philosophy and practice. The argument made in this paper emphasizes how crucial religious freedom is. It makes the case that it is essential to the discussion of human rights and the cornerstone of democratic institutions. Furthermore, it highlights more commonplace issues: religious freedom supports democracies' ability to remain both democratic and productive members of the international system. A country's democracy and national security are improved by political and cultural structures that are tolerant of other religions. As it examines "human dignity" and its connections to democracy and human rights, this paper also takes a more secular stance. It evaluates these concerns in light of the Mothers of the Disappeared movement's achievements in Argentina and the ongoing fight for democracy and human rights in the Middle East. The broader conclusion of this paper suggests that democracy and human rights have a solid, constructive relationship.

Keywords: Christianity, Democracy, Human Dignity, Human Rights, Mothers of the Disappeared.

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Received 26 April. 2025; Accepted 11 May. 2025. Available online: 30 May. 2025.
Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension)

Introduction

Samuel Huntington forewarned more than thirty years ago that religion would play a far larger role in the "clash of civilizations" than power politics. He added, "History, language, culture, tradition, and, most importantly, religion, distinguish civilizations from one another." According to Huntington (1993, pp. 22–49), "the fault lines between civilizations are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed." In a post-9/11 world where Islamic radicalism poses a threat, Huntington's wisdom is being reexamined—and with fervor. Even the most secular philosophers and scholars from all political and ideological backgrounds today find themselves speaking in terms of religion. Islam, reform-minded Muslims, and the possibilities for democracy in the Middle East are regularly featured in all of the main political journals and news magazines. The book shelves are stocked with titles such as Terror and Liberalism, Holy War, Inc., After Jihad, Infidel, and Knowing the Enemy. Pauletta Otis, a professor of strategic studies at the Joint Military Intelligence College, predicts that religious violence and conflict will be common in the twenty-first century. "The single most important political-ideological default mechanism in global conflict" is becoming religion, she continues (Seiple & Hoover, 2018, p. 11). Despite this new understanding of the importance of faith in the contemporary world, the concept of religious liberty—a vital aspect of religion—is sometimes overlooked. However, addressing this shift in geopolitics requires a strong commitment to religious freedom, both in theory and in practice.

There are philosophical justifications for emphasizing religious liberty: The idea of human rights and the democratic institutions that protect them are based on religious principles. Civil and political liberty are left up to the whims of the current ruler if the biblical understanding of each person's dignity is not upheld by law and custom. It is difficult to find a state that can claim even a passing devotion to fundamental civil liberties and is run according to a totally secular vision of human rights. The practical significance of the fight for religious freedom to democracy is a second argument. Dissident Protestantism served as the foundation for the idea of limited, representative governance.

It is no accident that the United States, the most prosperous democracy in the world, started off as the most varied and religiously free country in the West. The connection between faith and national security serves as a final justification for the importance of religious liberty in advancing human rights. In addition to violating democratic freedoms, regimes that zealously

uphold sectarian religion are frequently the scene of terrorist attacks. On the other hand, faith-based extremism typically poses less of a threat to governments that permit freedom of religion. "Treat religious freedom as a security issue, not just a human rights issue," as the International Crisis Group recently stated.

Will this be remembered as a democratic era by future generations? Or will our time be remembered as a time of lofty but unfulfilled promises? Will democracy actually turn out to be a transformative wave that is unsuitable for some peoples and cultures? Worse, will democracy be viewed as merely another tool used by the few to force their will on the majority?

We are in the optimistic camp. Because we firmly believe that a new era of democracy is dawning, accompanied by new international standards that validate democracy as a means and an end to a respectable political existence. There were about forty democracies in the world in the 1970s. Approximately 120 democracies have emerged by the year 2000. However, the world's peoples will not be satisfied with that figure; additional democracies will inevitably emerge. There won't be any nirvana in this new democratic era. Age never has. Nevertheless, future generations will remember a time when people did not shudder in the face of difficult, even dire, difficulties and who looked to what Abraham Lincoln referred to as "the last best hope of mankind" as the first and best hope of the oppressed many against the oppressive few. Winston Churchill once said that democracy was the "worst form of government except for all the others that have been tried." Despite this, democracy is still based on the dignity of the human person, both as a statement of fact and as a call to action for those whose dignity is regularly violated.

The thesis in this paper emphasizes the significance of religious freedom. It makes the case that it is essential to democratic institutions and a major topic in discussions about human rights. It also highlights more commonplace issues: religious freedom supports democracies' ability to remain both successful actors in the international system and democracies. Democracy and national security are improved in countries with religiously tolerant political and cultural structures. This essay also takes a more secular stance, concentrating on "human dignity" and its connection to democracy and human rights. In light of the Mothers of the Disappeared movement's achievements in Argentina and the ongoing fight for democracy and human rights in the Middle East, it evaluates these concerns. The broader conclusion of this paper suggests that democracy and human rights have a solid, constructive relationship.

A Foundation for Human Rights

The conceptual underpinnings of civil and political liberty are still up for debate. Political scientist Jack Donnelly gives only a page to the religious basis for rights in his 290-page textbook on human rights, dismissing the religious argument as unpersuasive (Donnelly, 2013, pp. 18-19). Michael Ignatieff, a Harvard professor, objects to the idea that human rights should be rooted in transcendent religion. He says that "it may be intended to increase its universal appeal by elevating the moral and metaphysical claims made on behalf of human rights." "On the contrary, it causes skepticism among religious and non-Western groups that do not require Western secular creeds." He claims that it is preferable to identify only prudential justifications for rights (Gutman, 2020, p. 53).

This line of reasoning has a clear flaw in that religious conviction was a prerequisite for the development of the idea of human rights. Religious principles and the political-constitutional changes that swept through Europe and America from the Reformation to the Enlightenment have close ties, as noted by legal expert Harold Berman. “In speaking of the secular outlook of the Enlightenment . . . one cannot ignore the fact that that secular outlook was itself derived from certain religious beliefs,” Berman argues (Berman, 2019, p. 138). In fact, the Enlightenment borrowed at least some of its foundational ideas from the Bible, despite being seen as the secular force behind democratic rights. The inherent freedom of the individual, the emphasis on human reason, the primacy of conscience—all these Enlightenment ideals found inspiration in Jewish and Christian claims about the God-given dignity of every person.

The Bible views humans as more than animals but less than angels—creatures, indeed, but creatures created in the image of their Creator—which is nearly unique among the world's religions. They can therefore reason, make decisions, be creative, imagine, love, and be moral. Any attack on a person's life or dignity is disrespectful to his Creator. These are the exact words used to condemn the first murder in the Bible, such as Cain's killing of his sibling Abel. Similarly, the Decalogue's moral precepts stem from the same comprehension of human nature. According to Jonathan Sacks, the head rabbi of Britain, "God declares in the first chapter of the Hebrew Bible that He has made man in His own image: to teach us that one who is not in my image is still in God's image." "That is the strongest remedy for hatred that has ever been developed." The intrinsic worth of every individual in God's eyes is the most potent illustration of any concept in the New Testament. Philosopher William James, a religious skeptic himself,

remarked, "St. Paul long ago made our ancestors familiar with the idea that every soul is virtually sacred." According to St. Paul, "we must despair of no one because Christ died for all of us without exception" (James, 2022, p. 357).

Enlightenment symbols were intimately conversant with these religious elements. No one can read the writings of John Locke (his Letter Concerning Toleration) or Thomas Paine (his political firebomb Common Sense) and not be struck by their dependence on biblical symbols and ideas. According to Locke, priests and magistrates should "tread in the footsteps, and follow the perfect example of that prince of peace, who sent out his soldiers to subdue nations, and gather them into his church, not armed with the sword, or other instruments of force, but prepared with the gospel of peace.... This was his method." Priests and magistrates should do the same, just like the captain of our salvation. Despite their violent anticlericalism, even the architects of the French Revolution created a "Declaration of the Rights of Man" that firmly established civil and political freedoms "in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being." The classic Enlightenment man of America, Thomas Jefferson, professed his intellectual loyalty to the strongly religious thinkers Locke, Newton, and Bacon. Historian Henry May claims that Jefferson's cosmos "was as purposeful as that of Timothy Dwight and presupposed as completely the existence of a ruler and creator" (May, 2018, p. 295). Think about the theological principles that drive the contemporary interpretation of conscience freedom as well. The Bible portrays conscience as the realm of faith and conviction, a sanctuary where divine grace and human decision making meet. Conscience is both personal and universal, provocative but not coercive, an expression of God’s moral laws yet corrupted by willful disobedience to those laws.

Martin Luther, a Protestant reformer, thereby used the right to freedom of conscience to challenge what he perceived to be the Catholic Church's repressive and incorrect doctrine. He told his accusers, "I cannot and I will not recant anything because it is neither right nor safe to go against conscience" (Bainton, 2017, p. 144). Luther would ignite both a spiritual and a political revolution. Indeed, a group of eminent philosophers considered Luther's accomplishment as they produced a statement examining the foundation for civil liberties following World War II, when the modern human rights movement began to take shape. The Reformation, "with its appeal to the absolute authority of the individual conscience," was one of the two historical occurrences most accountable for the cause of human rights, according to their 1947 UNESCO publication (UNESCO, 1949, p. 251). It is true that the seventeenth-

century religious conflicts were sparked in part by the Reformation, and that the current focus on freedom of conscience was a reaction to that violent, turbulent time. Western Christianity's history "is really one long and many-sided controversy over the proper interpretation of freedom of religion and conscience," according to researcher David Little (Little, 2018). Nevertheless, the proponents of religious liberty did not forsake religious ideals about conscience and human dignity. Rather, they upheld those ideals and pushed them to their logical conclusion.

Roger Williams, the seventeenth-century chronic dissenter, is the most potent example of this truth. Williams witnessed Bartholomew Legate, a preacher friend, being burned alive when he was eight years old for having the audacity to read and teach the Bible in English. Williams' lifelong fight to protect religious freedom from the machinations of church and state must have begun with this incident. But just as significant was his Christian conviction that all people are valuable in God's eyes. The same moral qualities were shared by Native Americans, Muslims, Jews, and pagan people. William Lee Miller, a historian, believes that Williams's comprehension of the core ideas of Christianity led him to repeatedly stress "our common humanity." Miller (2022) states that Williams's appeal to this shared humanity has a rare transcending self-critical turning and a range of moral imagination (pp. 129–130).

Williams' political outcome was to demand a clear division between church and state. It was the only guarantee that the magistrate would never enforce religious orthodoxy and force belief via the use of state authority. His saying, "Forced worship stinks in God's nostrils," is the result of this. He left Massachusetts Bay because of this conviction. Williams referred to what John Winthrop called a "holy covenant," in which civil law and religious law were frequently the same thing, as an unclean delusion (Morgan, 2017, p. 103). His Narragansett Bay settlement grew into Rhode Island, a sanctuary for religious dissidents of many backgrounds. "[N]o one in this colony shall be harassed or questioned for the matters of his conscience to God, so he be loyal and keep the civil peace," Williams said in his founding vision. Before we part with such a gem, sir, we have to part with lives and lands (Miller, 2022).

Faith and Freedom

Roger Williams's career also suggests a second justification for the connection between human rights and religious freedom. The pursuit of conscience liberty has shown to be the most crucial motivator for democracy. In other words, dissenting Protestantism is the foundation upon

which the fundamental concept of representative governance is built. Part of the cause is Protestantism's innate pluralism, or the variety of sects. However, its theology is also: Democratic rights typically follow the presence of Protestant spiritual concepts, such as the priesthood of all Christians, the universal availability of grace, the freedom of conscience, and the fallen state of all people. Scholars Robert Woodberry and Timothy Shah note that "cross-national statistical research suggests a strong and consistent association between a society's proportion of Protestants and its level of political democracy." "The Bible did not seem to stand in the way when Protestant beliefs in equality and freedom demanded a democratic politics" (Woodberry & Shah, 2019).

This connection between faith and freedom, which initially emerged during the English Revolution and the emergence of Puritanism, has been noted by many historians. Many would contend that the American Revolution and the American Founding were the ultimate results of Protestant insistence on religious liberty. No other country started its democratic journey with as much religious liberty and variety as the United States, despite the fact that most academics correctly emphasize the importance of republicanism and the Enlightenment.

In fact, the country's Founders believed that religion was essential to republican governance. James Madison, the father of the Constitution, was adamant on this point. Historian Edwin Gaustad states that Madison's focus was on the right of all people to pursue facts without any type of punishment, hardship, or civic impairment, rather than the truths that would be discovered at the end of the religious quest. When the Virginia General Assembly attempted to enact a General Assessment bill in 1784 to gather and disburse tax revenue to all Christian churches under the pretext of "public morality," the struggle to establish that right reached a climax. New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Massachusetts have all implemented comparable tax plans. Virginia had seen a drop in church attendance, but Madison saw the bill for what it was: an attempt to use public funds to support the Protestant Episcopal (Anglican) church. In July 1785, he wrote Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments in response to pressure from Baptist leaders and others. "[It] continues to stand, not merely through the years but through the centuries, as the most powerful defense of religious liberty ever written in America," writes biographer Irving Brant in evaluating the significance of Madison's fifteen-point statement (Miller, 2022, p. 98). Not surprisingly, Madison views religious belief as "precedent, both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society" in his Memorial (Berman, 2019). He gave the right of conscience the strongest possible political

foundation by elevating it above all other rights and obligations. His work as head of the House conference committee on the Constitution's Bill of Rights a few years later was undoubtedly influenced by this similar belief. "The civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship... nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext, infringed," was one of his initial and most ambitious proposals for the First Amendment. The final version—"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"—clearly carries the Madison imprint, albeit having somewhat weaker protections.

Madison's primary goal was to shield religious adherents from the government, not the other way around. In fact, he believed that religious freedom was the foundation upon which democratic freedoms were built. Since all other democratic liberties, like the right to free speech, the freedom of the press, and the right to assemble, were useless without religious freedom, it was considered America's "first freedom." Irving Brant states, "Maintenance would not automatically preserve the entire liberty of the citizen." "But the other rights would undoubtedly be destroyed without it."

The Crown Jewel of the Universal Declaration

The argument for an "international bill of rights" in the late 1940s was fueled by this similar conviction that religious freedom should come first. Members of the recently established United Nations Commission on Human Rights worked to draft a manifesto of civil freedoms while the Holocaust's horrors were still vivid in their minds. The writers cautioned that "barbaric acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind have resulted from disregard and contempt for human rights." The Universal Declaration of Human Rights' thirty articles list social and political safeguards, such as the freedom of expression and assembly, equality before the law, and the right to life and liberty. Additionally, arbitrary arrest, torture, and enslavement are prohibited. Article 18, which guarantees the right to "freedom of thought, conscience, and religion," is the document's crown jewel. Charles Malik, an Arab Christian ambassador from Lebanon and a prominent thinker on the Commission, wrote the clause. The communist and Muslim delegates were incensed by Malik's clause (nine members claimed Islam as their predominant faith, while six of the original European members were part of the Soviet bloc). During the argument, Malik presented four ideas that he believed ought to direct the Commission's work. Conscience rights against the state were mentioned in all of them. He stated, "The most sacred and inviolable things about people are their minds and consciences,

not their membership in this or that class, this or that nation, or this or that religion" (Malik, 2020, p. 29).

Malik directly challenged Marxist materialism by arguing that people had spiritual capacities that should be honored. "Man's purely animal existence largely impresses those who emphasize his fundamental economic rights and demands. Whatever you want to call it, this is materialism," he stated. "But the fight for human rights is a sham and a mockery unless man's true nature, his mind and spirit, are brought out, set apart, protected, and promoted." Since Islamic states viewed conversion outside of Islam as apostasy and sedition, Malik urged that Article 18 include the ability to change one's religion (Saudi Arabia would abstain from the final vote on the agreement as a result). But he refused to back down. His early years in Lebanon, where the population was roughly equal between Muslims and Christians and the country was a mash-up of Arabic, French, Christian, and Islamic traditions, must have played a role. Malik went to an American Protestant mission school and was raised by Greek Orthodox Arabs. He had personally witnessed the results of religious conversion.

The claim that man's spiritual freedom had political ramifications—that is, that the state's power must be sufficiently constrained to preserve such freedom—was the deciding point in spite of contentious discussions during Commission debates. More than any other member of the Commission, Malik made a distinction between the institutions of civil society, such as religious organizations, professional associations, and families, and the apparatus of government. This Arab thinker, like Madison and Tocqueville, recognized that private connections are what separate the state from the person. "We shall have legislated not for man's freedom but for his virtual enslavement," Malik cautioned, unless the planned proclamation "can create conditions which will allow man to develop ultimate loyalties... over and above his loyalty to the State." With its emphasis on religious liberty, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights has been the Magna Carta of the modern human rights movement for more than 60 years. Johannes Morsink of Drew University refers to it as the “secular bible” for literally hundreds of advocacy groups and thousands of foot soldiers in the field. Its language affirming the “equal and inalienable rights” of all people influenced scores of postwar and postcolonial constitutions and treaties (Morsink, 2019). The Vienna Concluding Document (1989), the U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief (1981), and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966) were all influenced by it and were created with the intention of advancing its ideals. Despite

not having legal power, the principles outlined in these agreements have influenced international safeguards for religious freedom for many years (Davis, 2020).

Religion and Security

Supporting religious freedom has never been a top priority for American foreign policy. That might be evolving. It is now more obvious than ever that regimes that restrict religious freedom also restrict other essential human rights, particularly countries where the overwhelming population is Muslim. These same countries frequently host terrorist groups, provide funding for their operations, or provide safe havens for them. "Recent events... demonstrate that promoting freedom of thought, conscience, religion, or belief as a U.S. foreign policy objective is intertwined with the aims of combating extremism and terrorism on the one hand, and promoting stability, freedom, and democratic development on the other," according to the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), which summarizes the relationship (2017).

Afghanistan and Iraq are the places where this realization is most evident. Both governments engaged in flagrant and systemic abuses of religious freedom before to the invasions spearheaded by the United States. Saddam Hussein and the Taliban both used religion as a tool to suppress political dissent. Both made fun of fundamental human rights standards. Additionally, both were heavily involved in terrorist actions that had a disruptive effect on the global scene. Several human rights organizations expressed concerns about Afghanistan's commitment to religious freedom when the country adopted a new constitution in January 2004. The document does not specifically grant everyone the right to freedom of mind, conscience, and religion, even while it safeguards the ability of non-Muslim groups to practice their beliefs. "No law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of Islam," according to the constitution's "repugnancy clause." It's still uncertain if Afghanistan would uphold the international norm of religious liberty, which states that everyone has the freedom to change their religious beliefs. However, it is difficult to understand how other civil liberties, such as freedom of expression and freedom of the press, could thrive if the rights of conscience are not legally guaranteed. It is impossible to have a robust civil society without these freedoms. The nation's religious diversity cannot be managed peacefully without them. Social instability will be the inevitable outcome.

Iraq has comparable difficulties. When the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the Iraqi Governing Council approved the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religious belief

and practice for all Iraqis in the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) on March 8, 2004, it marked a dramatic shift toward human rights. According to a USCIRF analysis, "no decent interpretation of the TAL would allow the establishment of a state founded exclusively on Islam and Islamic law and without safeguards of universally acknowledged human rights." "It could serve as a model for the whole region" (2017). The rights of religious minorities are called into question by Iraq's permanent constitution, which is similar to the TAL in many ways. It states that "this Constitution guarantees the full religious rights to freedom of religious belief and practice of all individuals, as well as the Islamic identity of the majority of the Iraqi people." To put it mildly, those assurances are seriously at odds. The majority Shi'a Muslim population in the country has experienced religious freedom for the first time in decades since Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime was overthrown. Hardline clergy have apparently taken over local courts, and some Shi'a leaders are calling for the application of Sharia law. It is uncertain what the constitution's guarantees of religious freedom will ultimately accomplish, particularly in light of the continuous sectarian violence.

The future of religious freedom in both countries now heavily influences America's nation-building operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, which few officials foresaw. The tendency to suppress religious freedom and control religious fervor for political purposes is the underlying disease that is causing the turmoil in these countries as well as in countries like Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Sudan, Burma, and Indonesia. It is now painfully clear that religious freedom and national security are related: governments that respect religious liberty are also more likely to protect a variety of other fundamental civil and political rights; states that respect civil and political freedom are less likely to become havens for violent religious extremists. Harold Saunders, a twenty-year veteran of the National Security Council in the White House and the State Department, writes that any “realpolitik” approach to international relations that ignores the religious dimension of civil society and politics is anything but realistic. “The realist paradigm leaves human beings out of the picture and provides no space for religion—an especially problematic omission in our current international context” (Saunders, 2018, pp. 163-164).

America's foreign policy establishment was challenged by the Bush Administration to make the connections. In fact, President George Herbert Walker Bush emphasized the connection between national security and religious and political freedom in a number of significant addresses. "In pursuit of our goals... America must stand firmly for the nonnegotiable demands

of human dignity: the rule of law; limits on absolute power of the state; free speech; freedom of worship; equal justice; respect for women; religious and ethnic tolerance; and respect for private property," stated the Administration's 2002 National Security Strategy. According to Saunders (2018), p. 168, the paper goes on to say that the country's security strategy "must start from these core beliefs" and seek methods to increase liberty. A year later, in a speech commemorating the National Endowment for Democracy's twentieth anniversary, President Bush reiterated this theme. “The right to serve and honor God without fear of persecution is guaranteed by successful societies.” Bush stated, “As long as the Middle East is a place where freedom does not flourish, it will remain a place of stagnation, resentment, and violence ready to be exported. And with the spread of weapons that can bring catastrophic harm to our country and to our friends, it would be reckless to accept the status quo” (Saunders, 2018, p. 170).

The Road Less Travelled

Absolutely careless. The emergence of authoritarian regimes and violent, religious extremism has undoubtedly been facilitated by a disregard for religious freedom as a political and civic ideal. However, authoritarian regimes are not the only ones that exhibit prejudice against international norms for human rights, particularly religious liberty. It is present in many democratic state institutions and organizations—those that appear to be more incensed by "cultural imperialism" than by arbitrary detentions, torture, and deaths. According to Martin Palous, the Czech ambassador to the United States, "if you follow the human rights discourse today, it is a standard argument used again and again." "The idea of human rights is a form of covert European imperialism by the West, imposing standards and customs on other people" (Morsink, 2019).

Furthermore, even proponents of universal human rights frequently overlook the principles of religious liberty that emerged from the Christian past as the ultimate wellspring of those rights. On this point, Princeton professor of Christian ethics Max Stackhouse is unambiguous. He acknowledges that it is impossible to claim that all of Christianity and Judaism have embraced human rights. "However, intellectual integrity necessitates acknowledging that what are commonly referred to as 'secular,' 'western,' fundamental human rights principles originated from fundamental elements of the biblically based religions" (Stackhouse, 2021). This argument was taken for granted by a previous generation of policymakers and scholars. During the height of World War II, Jacques Maritain remarked, "The secular conscience has understood the dignity of the human person under the often misunderstood but active

inspiration of the Gospel." The secular mind "has understood that the person, while being part of the State, yet transcends the State, because of the inviolable mystery of his spiritual freedom," he claimed, under the same inspiration (Maritain, 1944). As president throughout the war, Franklin Roosevelt saw that the Nazis' repression of religious freedom was part of their threat to civilization. "It is the same fight to defend religion, democracy, and good faith among nations," he stated (Ribuffo, 2019).

History makes it clear that people who completely adhere to biblical religion are not the ones who pose the biggest threats to human dignity. Those who misuse religion to justify oppression or who reject the existence of universal human rights on secular grounds pose the greatest threats. This would be denying everyone's rights and spiritual desires, or what Augustine referred to as the "God-shaped vacuum in every human heart." With all of its political ramifications, this rejection of the fundamental foundation of human dignity is a surefire recipe for civil unrest and bloodshed. According to Kevin Hasson, president of the Beckett Fund for Religious Liberty, "a state that accommodates the religious aspirations of its citizens promotes stability and security for a simple reason." "Such a state recognizes its citizens accurately." America's political and constitutional structure is characterized by its acknowledgment of the spiritual nature of man. No country is better suited to advance this concept and all the democratic freedoms that rely on it thriving in the wake of 9/11's religious tyranny.

The Premise and Promise of Human Dignity

What is human dignity, in our opinion, that politics should respect and not infringe upon? Each of us has a basic understanding of the situation at hand. It is the idea that people are "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights," which is expressed in several of the major global faiths and codified in our own constitution. As President Bush stated in a number of speeches and as other presidents have often stated, this endowment means that "Liberty is not America's gift to the world; it is God's gift to humankind." This means that no institution, no government, and no culture can force or provide to the world something that its people are not ready for. This has been a painful lesson for the world. All one has to do is observe the political atrocities of the twentieth century to realize that, despite the glimmering promise of classless utopias and 1,000-year reichs, such institutions were only capable of destroying rather than creating.

According to St. Augustine of Hippo, the greatest father of the Western church, bad political institutions can only cause destruction because evil can only wreak havoc and deprive what is

good. They also couldn't and couldn't survive because all they could and would do was lay waste. Both from within and beyond, they were vanquished. Tens of millions of victims have been piled up on the altar of so-called historic necessity, and the world has taken notice.

In contrast to the horrors endured by many families, the impact of twentieth-century authoritarianism on a well-known family was comparatively moderate. The Volga Germans are a small people on the mother's side of the family. The Volga River region of Russia was home to these ethnic Germans. These German-speaking peasants were renowned for their work ethic, devotion, and thrift, which was why Catherine the Great had invited them to Russia. She hoped they would instill these practices on their Russian counterparts. The Volga Germans developed into a unique group over the ages. Despite being strangers among the vast sea of Slavic peoples, they were always the target of mistrust and occasionally attacks. However, until World War II and Stalin's brutality and paranoia, there was no planned effort to eradicate them. Nothing had been done by the Germans of the Volga. However, they were thought to have concealed their dormant sympathies for the German invaders. As a result, these communities were to be uprooted, and its members either slaughtered or sent into internal exile. This was frequently considered, as was the terrible outcome that would have befallen the grandmother and grandfather if their families had not left before the Bolshevik coup and the terrible events of World War II. The grandmother said several times that the relatives with whom she had remained in occasional contact were never heard from again after Stalin’s assault.

Democracy was limited or unknown among the Volga Germans. They had never experienced a democratic system of governance. Presumably, if a researcher with a particular sensibility had gone to their villages and conducted interviews with the locals, he or she would have come to the conclusion that these straightforward, devout people were not the foundation of democracy. They completely identified with their fellow ethnic Germans, known as the unser leute, and they most definitely did not consider themselves to be "rights-bearing subjects." They found the Bible to be authoritative. They had no infrastructure nor a democratic civic society. They operated under the presumption that the family's boys would inherit the land while the girls would not. This fictitious researcher would have been left behind. Because this legacy contained resources that emphasized the worth of every human being, such as the religious heritage of the Volga Germans. Certain things happen if you think that humans were made in the image of God. It might not lead to a socio-political equality system as we currently know it. However, the idea of human dignity is obviously incompatible with any government that regularly commits atrocities and cruelties, or that targets out entire groups of people for

annihilation. "No woman anywhere wants to be beaten seventy times because she has accidentally displayed a bit of ankle," a Muslim woman who fled Iran for the safety of our shores said in response to someone who challenged her. She fled a repressive theocracy for the bracing air of freedom of speech, free exercise of religion, and civic equality for women.

Not a single lady desires to be beaten. That's how easy it is. We don't care how "multicultural" you are; anyone who says that a culture practices routine beatings, amputations, and killings as part of its official, structural doctrine because, for a moment, a woman has wished to feel the sun on her bare face; or because, as a teenager, she has listened to hip-hop records; or because, as a homosexual, she is by definition unclean; or because, as a moderate follower of Islam, she opposes theocracy, is someone who doesn't understand the imperatives that flow from human dignity. Human dignity is not a negotiable concept. It cannot be negotiated. It's not a negotiating chip. The starting point is this location. From this starting point, some things happen. This is where we need to be more precise. It makes sense to consider what rights flow directly from the premise of human dignity and whether any system in the modern world, aside from democracy, regularly honors such rights and obligates itself to respect them. This is because democracies are linked to rights, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was a global commitment to human rights more than fifty years ago.

The Bill of Rights is, of course, the first explicit reference to rights in our system. The foundation of rights—in nature and the laws of nature—was mentioned in the Declaration of Independence. Man cannot, in a sense, take away what God, the higher law, or nature provide. The Bill of Rights' tenets center on civic liberties and the things that the government is not allowed to do to you. The main purpose of rights was to shield us from the overreach of the state by creating immunities. The subject of the rights was a member of the community, a civic creature, and a family member situated inside a network of interpersonal connections. However, such ties did not define us. We all have inherent dignity as individuals. We are both unique and connected. Both facets of our complicated natures are addressed by rights. We are both a part of some "many" and "one." Rights always involve other people and are always transferable. We can't be "different" on our own. Public and open, political freedom involves the potential for action and aids in appreciating the hope embodied by and manifested in the identities and behaviors of tens of thousands of regular citizens. A free citizen's activity, rooted in hope, upholds human dignity and creates new opportunities.

Scholars of the great civil rights movement of the 1960s point to the "repertory of freedom" that the movement embraced. It was led, of course, by African-Americans, who had historically been relegated to the status of people whose very natures rendered them unfit for the rights and responsibilities of democracy. However, another story was given by the famous slave song, "Oh Freedom/Oh Freedom/Oh freedom over me/And a'fore I'd be a slave/I'd be buried in my grave/And go home to my Lord and be free." It narrated a tale of human dignity-based democratic longing. In the powerful plea, "And ain't I a woman?" by Sojourner Truth A lady is a human being, right? And does this truth not have civic implications?

The "repertory of freedom" encompasses at least four fundamental definitions: freedom as liberation from oppression, freedom as moral autonomy, freedom as legal freedom, and freedom as participation. This repertory of freedom includes the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, Protestantism, and everything else. However, every culture arrives to similar realities in its own way. Every culture has its own resources that it can use to emphasize the need for liberty. Not every culture will have the same standards for human rights. However, we wager that no democratic culture can ever have laws that normalize disappearances, regular rapes, physical torture, restriction of religious freedom, ethnic cleansing, and the entire dismal repertoire of past and present tyrannical regimes. The naturally subjugated and the naturally supreme were neither created by nature, as Abraham Lincoln claimed, nor were they saddled, booted, and spurred with others to ride upon. At its most basic, democracy is the articulation of immunities, or the "thou shalt nots" of democratic governance. There will be numerous topics where cultures diverge and where customs mandate a range of normative products and results. Certain types of "positive rights," as they are known, can be maintained in some societies while not in others. For instance, the so-called social welfare democracies of Western Europe and Scandinavia are discovering that some of their social benefits have not been or are not being sustained in the long run. They are unable to satisfy the demands of citizens who have become used to a wide range of government benefits due to a shrinking tax base. The collapse of pension systems, the lengthening of work weeks, the shortening of vacations, the implementation of fee-for-service health care, and other changes are all very real.

However, none of us will draw the conclusion that these changes imply that Germany, France, or Norway are no longer democracies. These advantages are not the main issue. The immunities we have already listed are at the center of the issue. The premise of a particular human dignity is politically recognized at its lowest level by those immunities. There will undoubtedly be a

lot of lively debates, and they should. However, the subject of our writing is much more serious. As board members of the National Endowment for Democracy, we can say that we are aware of the atrocities that countless numbers of people around the world are currently experiencing at every quarterly meeting. Such individuals are not concerned with the complexities of competing prescription drug plans. It concerns how to put an end to routine violence and arbitrary killings so that people can work toward establishing a democratic civil society within a framework that respects human dignity.

The Prospects of Democracy

We now turn to democratic prospects. We have often argued that it is inaccurate—and even patronizing—to presume that some types of people are not suitable for democracy, that they do not want to experience the liberating atmosphere of freedom, or that they do not object to routine cruelty and savagery. Regardless of the framework used to define and market it, this is balderdash. First, we will examine the democratic movements in Latin America; second, we will examine the prospects for democracy in the Arab-Muslim world.

A wave of political atrocities swept over Argentina in the late 1970s and early 1980s. After a military takeover in 1976, the state made terror its official policy. From 1982, when Argentina was ruled by the third of three military juntas waging what was dubbed the "dirty war," to 1987, we traveled to Buenos Aires five times. By then, the worst of the "disappearances"—a horrible new term (though not a new reality) that had made its way into the political lexicon—had occurred. An estimated 10,000 people died during the "proceso," also known as the "Process of National Reorganization." A disproportionate number of young people were tortured and killed: 147 were children, and 69 percent were between the ages of sixteen and thirty. No one knows how many babies were born to mothers in captivity—mothers who were killed after the baby's birth. Estimates run to 400–500.

A group known as "The Mothers of the Disappeared" arose in this horrific matrix of political tragedy. Las Madres divided into two factions, one supporting a Peronist policy on paper and the other advocating for human rights and constitutionalism. Nonetheless, the Mothers stayed together not just because they were grieving women but also because they insisted that the only acceptable government was one that upheld fundamental human rights interpreted as immunity. Human rights were incorporated into and formed a part of Las Madres' political party identity. Human rights "is the only bulwark, however fragile, against the brutalization of everyday life

in many parts of the world," according to political scholar James Tully. It follows that "the resistance to oppression will tend to take the form of a struggle for the establishment of liberty in its rights form" as the idea of human rights has become "part of the normative culture of every country and is advanced by international institutions."

As we discussed these and other issues with some Las Madres members, we discovered that human rights were not a means of granting entitlements but rather a means of expressing people's eternal immunity from the abuses of their governments. It meant "Stop!" rather than "Gimme." Their resistance was given political substance and form by rights. According to Maria Adela Antokoletz, one of the Mothers, "those who killed and tortured will do it again because they got away with it when justice is not fulfilled, when rights are not cherished." In their January 2015 "Project Proposal of Madres de La Plaza de Mayo," the Linea Fundadora group of Mothers said: "We are confident that our acts contribute to the strengthening of democracy.... In order to ensure that there will never be repression in our land again and that our children can grow up in freedom, we are also positive that history has assigned us the responsibility of serving as the Memory.

The Mothers incorporated democracy in its distinctly liberal interpretations—historic liberalism, which is based on human rights interpreted as privileges and obligations—into their self-definition. The moral weight of a human rights argument helps to rekindle dormant parts of a demoralized and sluggish civil society through their actions and deeds. These mothers would argue that human rights cannot be violated with such impunity again, regardless of Argentina's destiny. In the name of their children's lives lost, they have dedicated their life to that wager.

Remember that there used to be a common belief that democracy would not last in Latin America because Catholicism could never create and support a democratic society due to the Church's traditional structure, the role of the Pope, and the magesterium. In encyclical after encyclical, sermon after homily, and speech after speech, John Paul II emphasized the need of respecting non-negotiable rights, starting with the right to life.

We now discuss the chances for democracy in the Muslim-majority Arab Middle East, an area that suffers from a severe lack of freedom and democracy. We hear the same old refrain here as well: democracy is a foreign transplant; the great majority of Muslims cannot or do not want

democracy; democracy is incompatible with Islam; and so on. However, an association of Arab states' report started with a critical self-examination that was quite different. The group claimed in what has been called a "brutally honest" report that the "three main reasons the Arab world is falling off the globe"—that is, that Spain's GDP is higher than the GDP of all twenty-two Arab states combined—are a lack of women's rights, a lack of high-quality education, and a lack of freedom to speak, innovate, and influence political life. According to the research, a significant "deficit of freedom undermines human development." Despite improvements in school enrollment, 65 million Arab adults remain illiterate, with about two-thirds of them being women. This astounding statistic says it all: "The Arab world translates about 300 books annually—one-fifth the number that Greece alone translates."

No woman wants to be kept in the dark, just as she doesn't want to be mistreated. People never return once they experience freedom and literacy. Why wouldn't someone reject an education once it becomes available or hide inside a house when they could go out into the world if the previous state was so excellent and in line with human dignity?

There is ample and unmistakable evidence from courageous Arab Muslim moderates advocating for "civic Islam" that claiming that Islam is inherently incompatible with and antagonistic to democracy and fundamental human rights is a type of cultural condescension. As part of its stated policy, the United States would no longer tolerate and justify "the lack of freedom in the Middle East," which we support. Such accommodations "did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty," as President Bush noted. There are hundreds of democratic civil society projects in progress in Iraq, despite the insurgents' advances and the heartbreaking difficulties in establishing efficient governance. The number of people who support independent economic activity and civic education is increasing. Networks of communication are exploding now that people no longer face the possibility of a death penalty for the mere possession of a cell phone. Over 100 newspapers are being published.

There are an increasing number of independent radio stations. The evolution of political parties is exciting. The underlying assumption is that various groups can form alliances with one another, making future interethnic politics feasible. There are about 200 political movements and parties that are bringing these to light. Some have grouped together along religious lines, as well as women, businesspeople, and secular professionals. The majority of Iraqi civic

organizations identify as human rights organizations, and they were established to record and address the violations of human rights carried out by Saddam Hussein's government, which resulted in the discovery of hundreds of mass graves where the dead were shamefully dumped into the earth. The Free Prisoners Movement, for instance, is a new group that meets with victims every day to record accounts of forced disappearances and abused families. There is now an indigenous National Democratic Institute that aspires to be a major force in advancing and fortifying the process of democratization. The fact that women are active members of these civil society organizations is noteworthy.

The iceberg is much larger than this. There are many challenges on the horizon. On the ground, the security situation is dangerous, especially in Iraq's so-called Sunni Triangle. Sectarian militias are still a problem for the central authority. However, despite the irritation, there is a sense of hope and enthusiasm. It should come as no surprise that people are impatient for the "republic of human decency and dignity and democracy" now that the "republic of fear" has ended. Everybody is interested in how these developments turn out. We don't know how any decent person of conscience, whatever of their stance on the Iraq conflict, can help but hope and pray for a resolution that would allow the long-suffering Iraqi people to stop living in terror and to be allowed to join the table of free citizens.

Conclusion

The emergence of authoritarian regimes and violent, religious extremism has undoubtedly been facilitated by a disregard for religious freedom as a political and civic ideal. However, authoritarian regimes are not the only ones that exhibit prejudice against international norms for human rights, particularly religious liberty. It is present in many democratic states' institutions and organizations. Furthermore, even proponents of universal human rights frequently overlook the principles of religious liberty that emerged from the Christian past as the ultimate wellspring of those rights. History makes it clear that people who completely adhere to biblical religion are not the ones who pose the biggest threats to human dignity. Those who misuse religion to justify oppression or who reject the existence of universal human rights on secular grounds pose the greatest threats. This would be denying everyone's rights and spiritual desires, or what Augustine referred to as the "God-shaped vacuum in every human heart." With all of its political ramifications, this rejection of the fundamental foundation of human dignity is a surefire recipe for civil unrest and bloodshed.

In July 2019, the National Endowment for Democracy presented its annual "Spirit of Democracy" award to four courageous women from Muslim-majority nations: Mehrangiz Kar from Iran, Mariam Hussein Mohamed from Somalia, Muborak Tashpoulatova from Uzbekistan, and Nadjet Bouda from Algeria. Each spoke poignantly of her personal attempts to establish systems and administrations that do not regularly rape, torture, torture, or disappear. Each demanded greater American involvement and assistance, not less. These calls must be answered. They are ultimately the ones that are struggling. However, everyone who values freedom has an interest in how these conflicts turn out (Ribuffo, 2021, p. 179).

Fundamentally, the cries that are being heard are those for dignity, recognition, and the understanding that, despite the political horror and violence that all too many people experience on our troubled planet, there is still hope: hope that the arbitrary violence of warlords inciting hatred and despots killing innocent people will stop; hope that basic decency and dignity will be restored. This optimism is based on the understanding that democracy is not a cure-all and that no system is flawless. However, it continues to be the best and last political chance on Earth. The city of God cannot exist in a democratic society. However, democracy provides glimpses of the ideal sisterhood and fraternity that religious believers think would define the end times through its dedication to an earthly city of human dignity. Meanwhile, there is work to be done, and that is what democracy is for.

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