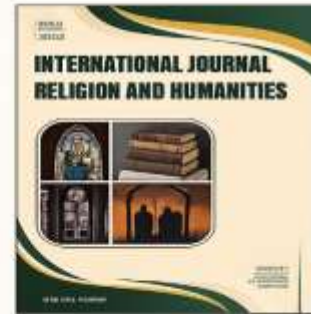



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## **Human Rights, Ethics, and Religion in the Modern World**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The discourse on human rights, ethics, and religion has become increasingly relevant in the modern world, where global interconnectedness highlights tensions between universal values and cultural particularities. This article explores the intricate relationship among these three domains, emphasizing their convergence and divergence in shaping contemporary societies. Human rights are often considered universal and legally binding, while ethical frameworks differ across traditions, and religious beliefs provide both foundational and contested grounds for moral action. By analyzing philosophical perspectives, religious traditions, and contemporary debates, this article demonstrates that the dialogue between religion and human rights is essential for fostering global peace, tolerance, and social justice.

**Key Words:** *human rights, ethics, religion, modernity, social justice, universal values, cultural diversity, global dialogue*

### ***Introduction:***

Human rights discourse has emerged as a global framework for ensuring dignity, equality, and justice for all individuals. Yet, its intersection with ethics and religion often provokes complex debates, as moral reasoning and faith-based traditions sometimes align with, and at other times challenge, universal human rights frameworks. Ethics provides philosophical grounding for human rights by exploring questions of moral obligation, fairness, and justice. Religion, meanwhile, has historically shaped societies' moral codes and continues to influence human behavior, politics, and social norms. In the modern world, globalization has intensified encounters between different ethical and religious systems, raising the question: how can human rights be respected universally while acknowledging diverse cultural and religious traditions? This article addresses this question through an exploration of philosophical debates, religious responses, and practical challenges in implementing human rights globally.

### **Human Rights as Universal Principles:**

### **Historical Development of Human Rights:**

The concept of human rights has deep historical roots, evolving from philosophical, religious, and political traditions across civilizations. Ancient codes, such as the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi and the edicts of Ashoka in India, reflected early ideas of justice and moral responsibility. In Europe, the Magna Carta (1215) marked an important milestone in limiting absolute power and

recognizing certain individual liberties. The Enlightenment period further advanced human rights discourse, with thinkers like John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau articulating the principles of natural rights, liberty, and social contracts. The American Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) institutionalized these ideals in political practice, setting the stage for the modern conception of universal rights.

### **Legal Frameworks such as the UN Declaration of Human Rights:**

The **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)**, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948, represents the most significant codification of human rights principles at a global level. Drafted in the aftermath of World War II and the Holocaust, the UDHR emphasizes inherent dignity, equality, and rights that belong to every human being regardless of nationality, race, gender, or religion. It consists of 30 articles covering civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights. While not legally binding, the UDHR has inspired numerous international treaties, such as the **International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)** and the **International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR)**, together forming the International Bill of Human Rights. Regional frameworks, including the European Convention on Human Rights, the American Convention on Human Rights, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, also reinforce universal standards within local contexts.

### **Tensions Between Universalism and Relativism:**

One of the central debates in human rights discourse is the tension between **universalism** and **cultural relativism**. Universalists argue that human rights are inherent, inalienable, and applicable to all humans regardless of cultural or religious differences. This position underlines the idea of moral equality and the indivisibility of rights. In contrast, relativists maintain that human rights must be interpreted within cultural, social, and religious contexts, as universal claims may overlook traditions and values unique to specific communities. For example, issues related to gender equality, freedom of expression, and family law often create friction between international human rights standards and local religious or cultural norms. While universalism ensures global accountability, relativism highlights the importance of respecting cultural diversity and sovereignty. Bridging these positions requires continuous dialogue, fostering an understanding that universal principles can coexist with contextual applications.

Ethics and the Moral Foundation of Human Rights:

### **Philosophical theories of morality:**

#### **Kantian (deontological) ethics.**

Kant grounds morality in rational autonomy and the *categorical imperative*: act only on maxims you can will as universal law, and treat persons always as ends, never merely as means. This view yields a powerful basis for human rights: because rational agents possess inherent dignity, they have claim-rights (e.g., to life, liberty, due process) that impose strict duties on others and the state. Rights are not contingent on outcomes; they are owed unconditionally. (Kant, *Groundwork; Metaphysics of Morals*.)

#### **Utilitarian (consequentialist) ethics.**

Classical utilitarianism (Bentham, Mill) evaluates actions and policies by their contribution to overall well-being. Rights are justified instrumentally—as stable “rules of thumb” (rule utilitarianism) that, when generally respected, maximize social welfare (e.g., freedom of expression fosters knowledge and prosperity). A persistent challenge is the “sacrifice of the few” objection; common replies include rule-utilitarian constraints and *threshold* deontology that forbids rights-violations below catastrophic thresholds. (Mill, *On Liberty; Utilitarianism*.)

#### **Virtue ethics (aretaic).**

Aristotelian ethics centers on *eudaimonia* (flourishing) achieved through virtuous character and practical wisdom. Rights can be interpreted as social and legal conditions that enable human flourishing—for example, education and health as prerequisites for exercising excellences. Contemporary “capabilities” theorists (Sen; Nussbaum) translate virtues/flourishing into a list of basic capabilities every polity must secure, dovetailing with socio-economic rights.

### **Synthesis.**

Deontology explains the inviolability of persons; consequentialism explains the social benefits of rights; virtue/capabilities explains the human ends rights serve. Together they provide a plural, mutually reinforcing justification.

### **2) The role of ethics in legitimizing human rights:**

**Normative authority:** Ethics explains *why* rights bind—either because dignity creates side-constraints (Kantian), because rights maximize well-being (utilitarian), or because they safeguard the capabilities required for a flourishing life (virtue/capabilities).

**Public reason & consensus:** Liberal “public reason” (Rawls) and discourse ethics (Habermas) show how diverse citizens can endorse the same rights for different ethical reasons—an *overlapping consensus* that legitimizes rights in plural societies.

**Indivisibility and priority:** Ethical theory clarifies trade-offs—e.g., why torture is categorically wrong (deontology), why due process is a high-yield rule (consequentialism), and why minimum social protections meet capability thresholds (virtue/capabilities).

**Duties correlative to rights:** Ethics specifies *who owes what to whom*—negative duties not to harm (liberty rights) and positive duties to assist or provide (welfare rights), distributed across individuals, institutions, and corporations.

### **3) Ethical dilemmas in applying human rights across contexts:**

**Freedom of religion vs. equality/non-harm:** When religious norms conflict with gender equality or bodily integrity (e.g., child marriage, FGM), adjudication invokes proportionality, best-interests of the child, and least-restrictive-means tests.

**Free expression vs. hate speech and disinformation:** Balancing epistemic and democratic benefits of speech against harms to security and equal citizenship; platform governance raises questions of private power and due process online.

**Privacy vs. collective security/public health:** Surveillance, contact-tracing, and counterterrorism demand necessity, proportionality, time-limits, transparency, and independent oversight.

**Socio-economic rights under scarcity:** Priority-setting for health care, disaster relief, or education pits equality against utility; triage frameworks (need, prognosis, life-cycle) and capability thresholds aim to avert unfair discrimination.

**Development vs. environmental/indigenous rights:** Large-scale projects can threaten ecosystems and cultural survival; rights-based Environmental and Social Impact Assessments and Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) operationalize fair resolution.

**Migration and asylum:** Non-refoulement obligations conflict with border control; ethics guides fair-share duties, safe pathways, and humane detention alternatives.

**Transitional justice:** Peace deals trading amnesty for stability vs. victims’ rights to truth, justice, and reparation; hybrid solutions combine prosecutions with truth commissions and reparations.

**Corporate responsibility & supply chains/AI:** Complicity in labor abuses or algorithmic discrimination triggers duties of human-rights due diligence, auditability, and remedy.

**Practical tools for resolution:** proportionality analysis; rights-impact assessments; participatory and inclusive deliberation; intersectional analysis; capability “floors” below which no person

should fall; and judicial doctrines like the margin of appreciation (with guardrails against persistent discrimination).

**Key references (classic, non-exhaustive):**

Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*; *Mill*, *On Liberty & Utilitarianism*; *Aristotle*, *Nicomachean Ethics*; *Rawls*, *Political Liberalism*; *Sen*, *Development as Freedom*; Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities*; Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms*.

Religion and Human Rights: Harmony and Conflict:

**Religious contributions to human rights discourse:**

Religion has historically provided some of the **foundational moral vocabularies** that later developed into human rights frameworks.

**Christianity** emphasized the *imago Dei* (humans created in God's image), laying the groundwork for the inherent dignity of every person. Natural law theorists like Thomas Aquinas argued that moral order is accessible through reason and reflects divine justice, anticipating universal principles of rights.

**Islam** introduced the concept of *huquq al-'ibad* (rights of human beings) alongside *huquq Allah* (rights of God). The Qur'an and Hadith advocate for justice (*adl*), compassion, and protection of the weak. Historical Islamic charters, like the **Constitution of Medina**, outlined rights for diverse communities, including Jews and Muslims.

**Judaism** emphasizes covenantal justice and duties toward others, particularly the vulnerable. The Torah and Talmud underscore obligations to the poor, widows, and strangers.

**Buddhism** contributes through compassion (*karuṇā*) and non-violence (*ahiṃsā*), reinforcing the idea of minimizing suffering as a human obligation.

**Hinduism** highlights *dharma* (righteous duty) and respect for life, linking moral order to social justice.

Together, these traditions enriched the **language of dignity, justice, and moral obligation**, shaping later secular codifications such as the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948)**.

**2) Religious objections to certain modern rights:**

Despite contributions, religion sometimes stands in tension with contemporary human rights claims:

**Gender Equality.**

Some conservative interpretations of Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism limit women's leadership roles or prioritize patriarchal family structures.

Religious objections arise to equal inheritance rights, reproductive freedoms, or women's participation in clergy.

**Freedom of Expression.**

Blasphemy laws in certain states restrict criticism of religious figures or doctrines, justified as protecting sacred values but criticized as curtailing freedom of speech.

Tensions arise when secular art, satire, or scholarship offends religious sentiments.

**Sexual Orientation and Identity.**

Same-sex marriage, LGBTQ+ rights, and gender identity recognition often conflict with traditional religious teachings.

Many faith communities argue for preserving "natural" or divinely ordained orders, while human rights advocates emphasize individual autonomy and equality.

**Bioethics and Technology.**

Issues such as abortion, euthanasia, and genetic modification elicit religious concerns about sanctity of life, often clashing with rights framed around autonomy or scientific progress.

These objections reflect the **plurality within religions themselves**—progressive, moderate, and conservative interpretations differ significantly, showing that tensions are not merely between “religion” and “rights,” but also within religious communities.

### 3) **Interfaith perspectives on justice and dignity:**

Interfaith dialogues have emerged as constructive platforms to reconcile universal human rights with religious pluralism:

**Shared Core Values.** Most faith traditions converge on principles of justice, compassion, human dignity, and care for the vulnerable. Initiatives such as the *Parliament of the World's Religions* highlight these shared commitments.

**The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990)** sought to affirm human rights within an Islamic framework, although its linkage to Sharia has generated debate about universality.

**The Vatican's stance** on human rights emphasizes religious freedom and social justice, showing alignment with secular frameworks while maintaining doctrinal distinctiveness.

**Jewish-Christian-Muslim dialogues** often emphasize the Abrahamic heritage of justice and stewardship.

**Eastern traditions** (Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian) emphasize harmony, duty, and compassion, offering complementary perspectives to rights discourse.

**Practical collaborations:** Interfaith coalitions often advocate against poverty, environmental destruction, and violence, showing religion's positive capacity in advancing global justice.

Overall, **interfaith engagement reframes religion not as an obstacle but as a resource** for building consensus on dignity and justice across cultural contexts.

Contemporary Challenges in a Globalized World:

### **Human rights violations in conflict zones:**

Armed conflicts and political instability remain among the most serious threats to the protection of human rights. In regions such as Syria, Yemen, and Sudan, civilians face indiscriminate attacks, forced displacement, and systematic targeting of vulnerable groups. International humanitarian law, particularly the **Geneva Conventions**, provides guidelines for protecting non-combatants, yet enforcement is often weak. Refugees and internally displaced persons encounter limited access to food, healthcare, and education, highlighting the gap between human rights ideals and their implementation in war-torn contexts. The **Responsibility to Protect (R2P)** doctrine emerged as a global principle to prevent mass atrocities, yet its selective application raises ethical and political concerns.

### 2) **Ethical issues in technology, bioethics, and environmental rights:**

The rapid growth of science and technology presents unprecedented human rights dilemmas:

**Technology:** Mass surveillance, artificial intelligence, and data exploitation threaten privacy and autonomy. Governments and corporations collect personal data without consent, raising questions about digital rights and algorithmic fairness.

**Bioethics:** Genetic engineering, cloning, and end-of-life decisions test the limits of human dignity. Disagreements persist over issues such as abortion, assisted dying, and organ markets, where cultural, religious, and ethical values diverge sharply.

**Environmental rights:** Climate change and ecological degradation threaten the right to life, health, and sustainable development. The recognition of the “**right to a healthy environment**” by the UN in 2022 reflects growing awareness of environmental justice as integral to human rights.

Conflicts between economic growth and ecological sustainability pose profound ethical questions for global governance.

### **3) Religion as a source of peacebuilding vs. conflict:**

Religion continues to play a dual role in contemporary societies. On the one hand, it fuels sectarian violence, terrorism, and exclusionary politics, often exploited by extremists or authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, faith-based organizations and interfaith initiatives contribute significantly to peacebuilding and reconciliation. The role of the **Catholic Church in post-conflict Latin America**, **Islamic NGOs in humanitarian relief**, and **Buddhist monks in peace movements in Southeast Asia** demonstrate how religious actors can foster reconciliation, dialogue, and social healing. The challenge lies in mobilizing religion's potential for unity while resisting its misuse for division.

Towards a Dialogue Between Human Rights, Ethics, and Religion:

#### **The importance of intercultural and interfaith dialogue:**

Globalization has intensified interactions among diverse cultures and religions, making dialogue essential for human rights advocacy. Intercultural and interfaith dialogue allows communities to **recognize shared values** such as justice, dignity, and compassion, while respecting cultural differences. Initiatives such as the **UN Alliance of Civilizations** and grassroots interfaith forums highlight the practical benefits of dialogue in reducing tensions, building trust, and fostering collaborative responses to human rights challenges.

### **2) Ethical pluralism and the search for common ground:**

Ethical pluralism acknowledges the coexistence of multiple moral traditions, rejecting the idea that only one ethical framework can justify human rights. Instead, it emphasizes an **“overlapping consensus”** (Rawls) where different groups, religious or secular, support human rights for diverse reasons. For example, freedom of conscience may be justified as both a liberal principle of autonomy and a religious principle of respect for God-given dignity. This pluralist approach strengthens the legitimacy and universality of human rights without erasing cultural specificities.

### **3) Future directions for global human rights advocacy:**

Looking ahead, effective human rights advocacy must:

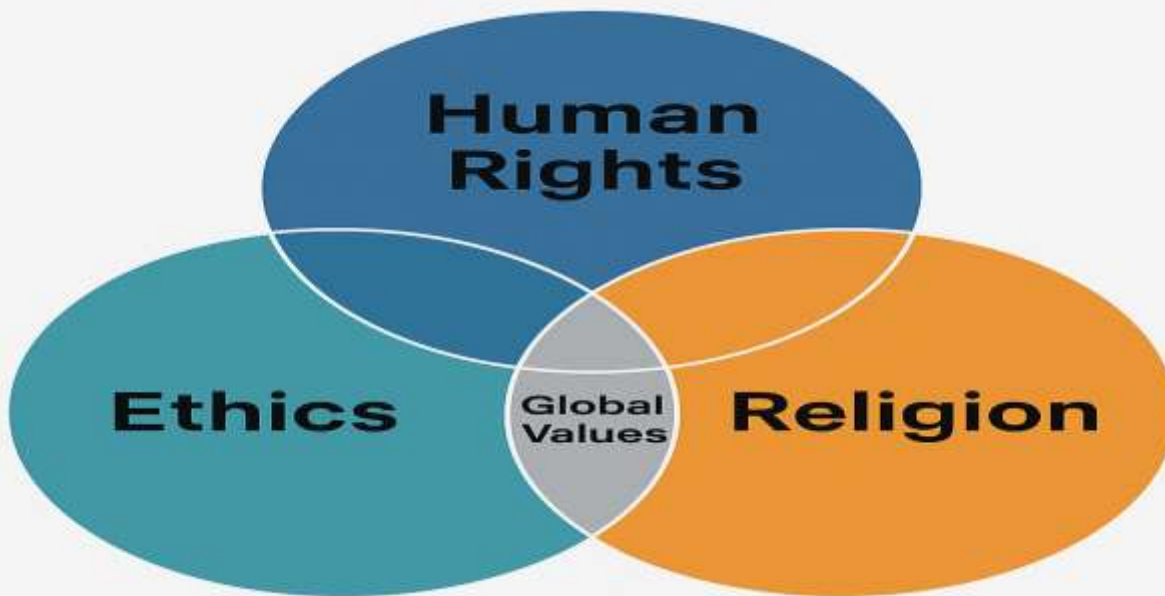
**Integrate environmental and digital rights** into the human rights framework, recognizing new frontiers of human vulnerability.

**Strengthen international institutions** like the UN Human Rights Council and International Criminal Court to ensure accountability for violations.

**Promote grassroots participation**, empowering marginalized communities to voice their concerns and shape global human rights agendas.

**Leverage religion positively**, encouraging faith communities to embrace progressive interpretations that align with human rights values.

**Foster a culture of solidarity**, where ethical, religious, and secular traditions contribute to a global moral community rooted in dignity and justice.



### Summary:

The intersection of human rights, ethics, and religion in the modern world reveals a complex but essential dialogue for shaping just and inclusive societies. Human rights emerged historically from philosophical and political traditions but were also deeply influenced by religious values emphasizing dignity and justice. Ethical theories—Kantian, utilitarian, and virtue ethics—provide strong foundations for legitimizing rights, while also exposing dilemmas in their application across diverse cultural contexts. Religion contributes positively by offering moral depth and community-based values but often raises objections to certain modern rights such as gender equality, reproductive freedoms, and freedom of expression. In a globalized world, contemporary challenges like conflict-related violations, technological and bioethical dilemmas, and environmental crises require renewed human rights frameworks that integrate ethics and faith traditions. Religion's dual role as both a source of conflict and a means of peacebuilding underscores the importance of constructive interfaith engagement. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue strengthens the universality of human rights by enabling ethical pluralism and common ground without erasing cultural diversity. The future of human rights advocacy lies in embracing **ethical pluralism, religious dialogue, and global solidarity**. Expanding protections to include environmental and digital rights, reinforcing international accountability mechanisms, and engaging grassroots communities will ensure that human rights remain adaptable to evolving challenges. Ultimately, the harmony of human rights, ethics, and religion offers the most promising pathway to uphold human dignity and social justice in an interconnected world.

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