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A UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS BY WORLD RELIGIONS: BASIS AND PROBLEMS

*By Abraham H. Khan**

Is there a basis for this proposed document? If you see the world and human life as being more than secular, as having also a transcendent dimension, then the existing *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) is problematic for world religions. It excludes the world religions as a positive resource for human rights. If you do not see human life that way, then confine the document to the trash. Sober thinking individuals, however, understand the importance of security, peace and development for human life to thrive. They consider development to be more than economic or social, to include personal development as well. This means that to speak about development in the context of security and peace is to affirm that human life is more than transactional arrangements between collectivities or nation states and therefore they would not readily dismiss the document without some reflection on it. That having been said, it provides a context for what I want to do. It is to problematize the document as a way of opening it up for reflection.

Problematic: Three Matters of Concern

- 1) Do world religions add anything crucial to the set of articles or modify significantly specific articles in the UDHR? This question requires considering how each religion understands the person or individual, the human situation. Each understands humanity's situation differently, sees being a person or self in a different light, and views the solution to the problem also differently. In theory, given different sets of interpretation, it would seem that religions of the world do have a different perspective from each other and form a secular outlook serving as a framework for the UDHR and in fact for the proposed document.
- 2) Still at a theoretical level, there is the question of implementation of the rights that the document affirms. That is, in this particular case, would implementation mean also self-monitoring and does the idea of monitoring imply also an obligation to self-censure? Are rights in the context of the document a "hypothetical construct" to be understood as grounds of protest and justification for reforming policies to guarantee basic human needs and human interests? Or, are the set of rights and duties simply appeals to ideals shared by world religions?
- 3) Endorsing the document would mean addressing issues that cannot be dodged indefinitely. One such issue involves Article 14 about the right not to be

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deported. Another involves Article 16 regarding the ideas of marriage and family. These definitions vary with different religions, not to mention that secular definitions are being contested. Then Article 8 is an occasion to reflect whether forgiveness is a right or duty (for whom??), in fact whether it is required for the common good, whether it is a concept that is subscribable by the various world religions. Article 18 speaks of no compulsion in religion, and of promoting peace and tolerance among religions and ideologies. But the question of religion in conflict with other religions or with ideologies over the question of whose truth is to prevail, provides little insight. The duties to which the document refers seem to rest neither with individuals at large nor with specific individuals. Would its adoption by religions of the world be a significant gain over the existing UDHR? Would more light be shed towards a resolution of the conceptual difficulties related to praxis in the UDHR?

These concerns notwithstanding, I do not think that the language or discourse of human rights is immune to religious ideas or influence. For that reason this document or the initiative that represents requires serious reflection.