



**The Future of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:
Towards a Global Consensus that the UDHR Embodies a Civilizational Vision that
the World's Diverse Peoples, Faiths, and Nations Should Strive to Fulfill
An International Consultation among Senior Religious and Academic Leaders**



**Princeton University
13 – 14 December 2023 • Princeton, New Jersey USA**

“Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world....”
~ Preamble, Universal Declaration of Human Rights (10 December 1948)

The Challenge

With the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) approaching its 75th anniversary in December 2023, the time is overdue to address certain fundamental questions and problems that exist regarding the UDHR. Among these is the question of the philosophical, anthropological, and moral bases for the principles proclaimed as universal in that historic document. The drafters of the UDHR, in haste to get it approved, deliberately left the problem of foundations for another day. The document itself merely asserts that “recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.”

Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights contains a statement of principles that have strong support in the world's cultural, philosophical and religious traditions, it nonetheless contradicts what have historically been viewed as central teachings and practices by many of the world's major religions, including the Roman Catholic Church prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 1965); Islamic jurisprudence regarding the treatment of religious minorities; *halakha* (Jewish religious law) regarding the status and treatment of gentiles; and the Hindu caste system, among others.

While an impressively wide range of men and women helped draft the UDHR, which was approved by non-Western nations as culturally diverse as Afghanistan, Burma, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, India, Iran, Iraq, Liberia, Pakistan, Siam, and Turkey, decisions made by the leaders of these nations did not always reflect the traditional views held by a majority of their inhabitants.

With the passage of time, questions surrounding the foundations, meaning, purpose, and validity of the UDHR have acquired new urgency. Even the limited consensus that once

supported the universal rights idea is weakening. The Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam, adopted in 1990 by the Organization of the Islamic Conference, was a direct response to — and in many ways a rejection of — the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Today, some powerful countries are aggressively challenging the idea of universal rights in the name of national security or economic development, while many Western governments and civil society institutions are using the language of human rights to promote ideas that are not widely shared in other parts of the world, and often not even in their own countries.

Furthermore, economic and technological developments, including Artificial Intelligence, have brought new risks that human beings will be treated as instruments or objects. The spread of relativism and practical nihilism is draining the regenerative powers of faith and reason. Memories of the terrible 20th century wars, which were accompanied by enormous crimes against humanity, are fading, and the bloody regional and ethnic conflicts that followed have impaired the sense of the unity of the human family. Indeed, the brutal conflicts that have engulfed the Middle East, West Africa, and Ukraine in recent years, along with growing polarization in the West, demonstrate that much of the world remains trapped in the primordial cycle of hatred, supremacism, and violence that has plagued humanity since the dawn of history.

The UN Charter, United Nations Organization, and UDHR are not perfect. Indeed, both the structure and functioning of the United Nations remain problematic to the present day. However, the Charter of the United Nations and the UDHR were designed to abolish this primordial cycle of violence, by establishing a rules-based international order that would protect national sovereignty and ensure respect for the equal rights and dignity of all. By accepting the UN Charter, the nations of the world have endorsed, at least in principle, the vision of a secure and peaceful world, free of military aggrandizement, unjust discrimination, and oppression.

Yet as the 75th anniversary of the UDHR approaches, human rights violations and identity-based hatred, supremacism, and violence remain widespread. Ethnic and religious conflicts pose a particularly virulent threat to peace and security. For these conflicts do not remain localized; they inherently tend to spread, due to the ready appeal of communalism to those of like identity dwelling elsewhere.

The Consultation

On 13 – 14 December 2023, senior religious and academic leaders from around the world will gather at Princeton University (founded in 1746) for an international consultation entitled, “The Future of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

Co-sponsored by Princeton’s James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions; Indonesia’s Nahdlatul Ulama, the world’s largest Muslim organization; the G20 Religion Forum (R20); and the Center for Shared Civilizational Values, the consultation will assume the form of a moderated, structured discussion, which will:

- (a) Address fundamental questions and problems that exist regarding the UDHR 75 years after its adoption, and
- (b) Develop a strategy to revitalize the UDHR as a key pillar of support for a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values.

The consultation will begin with a public event on the evening of Wednesday, 13 December. This will consist of keynote speeches and a panel discussion at a high-profile venue on the Princeton campus. On Thursday, 14 December, participants will discuss and strategize how their respective cultural and religious traditions can facilitate the emergence of a global consensus regarding the UDHR.

Specifically, participants will be invited to share their expertise and advice concerning how best to achieve the following high-level objectives:

- Ensuring that religion functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions, rather than problems, in the 21st century;
- Clarifying, strengthening, and disseminating sources of inspiration and support that exist within our respective traditions for the principles articulated by the UDHR, in order to promote broader acceptance of those principles;
- Addressing obsolete and problematic elements of religious teachings that encourage hatred, supremacism, and violence towards those of other faiths, or none;
- Identifying shared values and establish reciprocity among the world's diverse peoples, cultures, and religions, by treating one another in accordance with the highest moral standards embraced by our respective traditions;
- Preventing the weaponization of identity, whether on the basis of ethnic, religious, national, and/or ideological affiliations; and
- Recovering ethical and spiritual resources, within our respective faith traditions, that will enable the world's diverse religions and cultures to co-exist peacefully.

The event will also seek to establish a core consensus among participants regarding the need to build a global Movement for Shared Civilizational Values, designed to help bring the world's geopolitical and economic power structures into alignment with the highest moral and spiritual values, for the sake of all humanity. This Movement will seek to accomplish the objectives outlined above, while encouraging the development of a global consensus that the United Nations Charter and the UDHR embody a civilizational vision that the world's diverse peoples, faiths, and nations should strive to fulfill.

The Sponsors

The [James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions](#) in the Department of Politics at Princeton University is dedicated to exploring enduring questions of American constitutional law and Western political thought. The Program is also devoted to examining the application of basic legal and ethical principles to contemporary problems. To realize its mission, the James Madison Program implements a number of initiatives. For example, the Program supports the James Madison Society, an international community of scholars, and promotes civic education by its sponsorship of conferences, lectures, seminars, and colloquia. The Madison Program was founded in the summer of 2000 by [Professor Robert P. George](#), holder of the celebrated McCormick Chair in Jurisprudence at Princeton University.

[Nahdlatul Ulama](#) is the world's largest Muslim organization. Founded in 1926 in Indonesia, when the country was under Dutch colonial rule, it has over 90 million followers and a network of 21,000 *madrasahs*. Nahdlatul Ulama, which means "Awakening of Scholars," has undertaken a variety of systematic and institutional efforts over the past decade to "prevent the

political weaponization of identity; curtail the spread of communal hatred; promote solidarity and respect among the diverse peoples, cultures and nations of the world; and foster the emergence of a truly just and harmonious world order, founded upon respect for the equal rights and dignity of every human being.” The eminent Muslim scholar [Kyai Haji Yahya Cholil Staquf](#) has been General Chairman of Nahdlatul Ulama since December 2021.

The [G20 Religion Forum \(R20\)](#) was established by Nahdlatul Ulama in March 2022, in conjunction with the Indonesian Presidency of the G20, in order to foster a rules-based international order founded upon shared moral and spiritual values. According to the R20’s Founder and Chairman, KH. Yahya Cholil Staquf, “The purpose of the R20 is to ensure that religion functions as a genuine and dynamic source of solutions rather than problems in the 21st century. Through the R20, we hope to facilitate the emergence of a global movement, in which people of goodwill of every faith and nation will help bring the world’s geopolitical and economic power structures into alignment with the highest moral and spiritual values, for the sake of all humanity.”

The [Center for Shared Civilizational Values](#) was established by leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama to preserve and strengthen a rules-based international order founded upon universal ethics and humanitarian values. In May 2022, the Nahdlatul Ulama Central Board appointed the Center for Shared Civilizational Values (CSCV) to serve as the Permanent Secretariat of the G20 Religion Forum (R20). As such, CSCV is responsible for the ongoing implementation and management of the work of the R20. Members of CSCV’s Board of Advisors include some of the world’s most distinguished religious and academic leaders, including [Mary Ann Glendon](#), Learned Hand Professor of Law, emerita, at Harvard University, and a former U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See.

“It would be truly a game changer, I will suggest, if the R20 were to stimulate the world’s most important religious authorities to reform their traditions from within and become forces for peace, carrying along with them the huge number of adherents that each of them could mobilize.”

~ Dr. Jonathan Benthall, writing in Sciences Po’s
[Bulletin de L’Observatoire International du Religieux](#)