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There's Life Yet in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

In the face of war and atrocities, the principles of the 75-year-old document remain sound.

By Mary Ann Glendon

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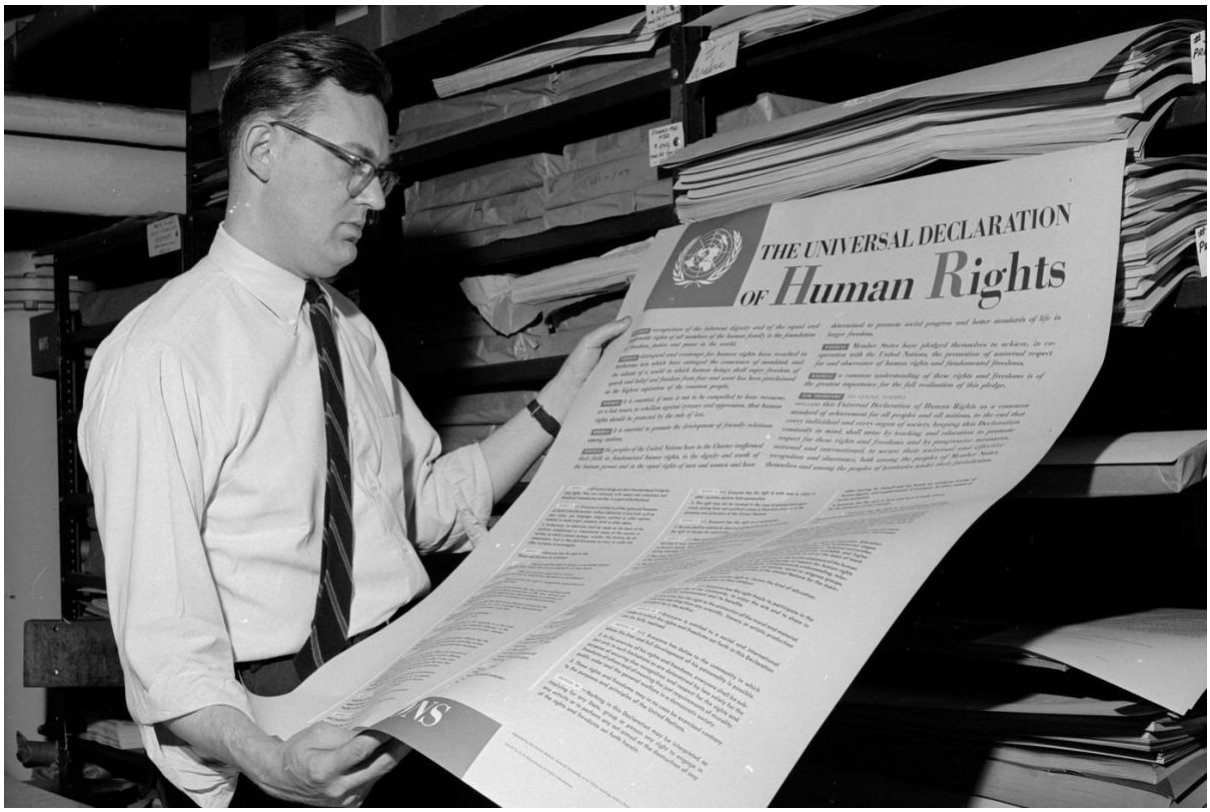

A man holds the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1955. PHOTO: THREE LIONS/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

The United Nations General Assembly approved the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on Dec. 10, 1948, without a single dissenting vote (although Saudi Arabia, South Africa and the Soviet bloc countries abstained). Today that remarkable consensus, achieved in the wake of two world wars and unspeakable atrocities, is falling apart. Hope for global consensus on anything seems remote.

But is it really the case that consensus on the relatively small set of fundamental principles in the Universal Declaration can't be reinvigorated? The history of the declaration suggests three reasons why the effort is worthwhile. And a promising development, as yet little noticed in the West, indicates there may be a fourth.

First, in 1948 political realists scoffed at the idea that mere words could make a difference. But by 1989 the world was marveling that a few simple words of truth—a few courageous people willing to call good and evil by name—could change the course of history. The Universal Declaration became the most prominent symbol of the great grassroots movements that hastened the demise of colonialism, brought down apartheid in South Africa, and helped topple the seemingly indestructible totalitarian regimes in Eastern Europe. Its nonbinding principles had more effect than the international covenants that were based upon it.

Second, religion played a large role in those transformative movements. As one of the lawyers who defended civil-rights workers in Freedom Summer 1964, I can testify that it was religious conviction that motivated many of us to follow Martin Luther King Jr. in the struggle to end legal segregation. The same was the case in freedom movements elsewhere.

Today, the role of religion is more complicated. Recent years have seen a rise in regional conflicts that implicate religion and a decline in religious affiliation in the West. That is a bad combination because religious zeal doesn't necessarily disappear when it ceases to be directed toward religious objects. It is often transferred to some other object, such as ethnic identity, and pursued with deadly dedication.

Fortunately, however, it isn't beyond the power of religious leaders and groups to reject ideologies that manipulate religion for political purposes or use it as a pretext for violence. Nor is it beyond their capacity to find resources within their own traditions for promoting respect and tolerance, as the Catholic Church did in Vatican II and as the world's largest Muslim political organization, Nahdlatul Ulama, is doing today. Humanitarian Islam, the inclusive, tolerant form of Islam promoted by that 100-million-member group, has real potential to shift the probabilities for peace in many parts of the world.

Third, it wasn't the great powers of the world but a coalition of less-powerful nations that assured that protection of human rights was included among the purposes of the U.N. Human rights weren't a priority for the five big nations that became permanent members of the Security Council. When those big nations decided to found a new peace and security organization, their main concern was to assure the stability of frontiers and provide a means of settling disputes.

But at the founding conference, delegates from lesser powers—such as Herbert Evatt of Australia, Charles Malik of Lebanon and Carlos Romulo of the Philippines—joined forces to expand that agenda. The language of the U.N. Charter became the foundation of the entire postwar human-rights project.

Today as in 1945, the most intense interest in the idea of universal human rights seems to be among nations and political groups that don't exert the most influence on the world stage—but that understand that without commitment to a few basic principles, nothing is left but the will of the stronger.

The Center for Shared Civilizational Values, founded by the Indonesia-based Nahdlatul Ulama, wants to build a movement to strengthen a rules-based international order grounded in universal principles. Joining in that endeavor is the world's largest network of political parties, Centrist Democrat International, composed mostly of European and Latin American political parties. In 2020 both organizations called for renewed global support of the human-rights principles in the Universal Declaration. That East-West collaboration is evidence that the core principles of the Universal Declaration have foundations in most of the world's great philosophical and religious systems.

None of this would have surprised the men and women who brought the postwar human-rights project to life. They had seen human beings at their best and worst. But while the human race is capable of gross violations of human rights, it is also capable of imagining that there are rights to violate and articulating those rights in declarations and constitutions. People can orient their conduct toward the norms they recognize and feel the need to make excuses when their conduct falls short.

Seventy-five years ago, these visionaries forged a consensus that helped millions achieve better standards of life and greater freedom. Before giving up on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we should ask: Is it really going to take more wars, and more horrors, to breathe new life into a few enduring principles of human decency?

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