Article

Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction

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A book examining religion in support and at odds with human rights

The cover of *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011) features Norman Rockwell's famous painting, *Golden Rule.* The painting depicts human beings representing the different regions and religions of the world, each with their hands clasped in prayer. Like Rockwell's painting, the book suggests that regard for human life is the throughline uniting all the major religions of the world. Religion, the book's contributors suggest, has the potential to be a vital force for peace, but history has too often shown religious figures using it to the opposite effect.

> ***While most of the world's religions have supported violence, repression, and prejudice, each has also played a crucial role in the modern struggle for universal human rights. Most importantly, religions provide the essential sources and scales of dignity and responsibility, shame and respect, restraint and regret, restitution and reconciliation that a human rights regime needs to***

> ***survive and flourish in any culture.***

Edited by John Witte and M. Christian Green, *Religion and Human Rights* contains two sections. The first section examines human rights traditions within major religions traditions. The second examines explores cases in which religion complicates the pursuit of specific areas of human rights.



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Part 1: Religious Perspectives on Human Rights

1. **Judaism:** In the first chapter, "A Jewish Theory of Human Rights," David Novack analyzes the balance between obligations to God and the rights of people in the Jewish tradition.
2. **Christianity**: In chapter 2, Nicholas P. Wolterstorff questions whether Christian tradition is compatible with notions of human and natural rights.
3. **Islam**: In chapter 3, Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im questions the universality of human rights principles that are at odds with Muslims and asserts the importance of Muslim communities upholding an Islamic foundation for human rights principles.
4. **Hinduism**: Werner Menski interrogates Western claims that Hinduism is "backward" and incompatible with human rights in chapter 4.
5. **Confucianism**: In chapter 5, Joseph C. W. Chan considers the ideal society described by Confucianism and compares its teachings with specific rights outlined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.
6. **Buddhism**: In chapter 6, Sallie B. King considers Buddhism and human rights in the

context of the following principles: individualism, the privileging of humanity, responsibility vs. rights, and adversariality.

7. **Indigenous Religions**: Ronald Niezen's chapter 7 questions the assimilationist bias in discussions of human rights and Indigenous communities. He also considers the tensions between Indigenous spiritualities and industrial modernity.
8. **Secularism**: In the final chapter of part 1, David Little questions whether it is possible to exclude religion from human rights and whether it is correct to assume that secular principles are superior to religious principles in defending human rights.



Sébastien Mamerot's depiction of the Siege of Antioch, one of the battles of the Crusades. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Part 2: Religion in Relation to Specific Human Rights

- **Freedom of Conscience:** In chapter 9, Steven D. Smith explores the phases and functions of freedom of conscience.
- **Freedom of Choice:** In chapter 10 Paul M. Taylor discusses the interaction between the principles of nondiscrimination and religious choice against the backdrop of the history of the United Nations.
- **Freedom of Expression:** Carolyn Evan's chapter 11 focuses on the difficulties of balancing freedom of expression and freedom of religion.
- **Equality and Nondiscrimination:** In chapter 12, Nazila Ghanea assesses religious claims about international human rights law and whether nondiscrimination is sufficient to promote equality.
- **Freedom of Association:** Natan Lerner discusses the tensions and overlap between freedom of religion and freedom of association in chapter 13.

- **The Self-Determination of Religious Communities:** In chapter 14, Johan D. Van Der Vyver considers the rights and limits of religious institutions in regulating their internal affairs without interference from external authorities.
- **Limitations on Religious Freedom:** T. Jeremy Gunn considers the balance between "absolute freedom of belief" and "limited freedom to manifest beliefs" in chapter 15.
- **The Right of Moral Freedom:** In chapter 16, written by Michael J. Perry, discusses the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion as well as freedom from coercion in religious choice. It also examines parental rights to provide moral instruction about children's rights as individuals.
- **Women's Rights:** In chapter 17, Madhavi Sunder considers the challenges that women reformers who demand both liberty and equality pose to traditional legal understandings of religion and culture.
- **Children's Rights:** In chapter 18, Barbara Bennett Woodhouse looks at children's religious rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- **Economic, Social. and Cultural Rights:** Ingvill Thorson Plesner's chapter 19 focuses on religion in relation to welfare rights such as the rights to education, health care, and labor.
- **Environmental Rights:** In chapter 20, Willis Jenkins asks whether environmental rights harmonize with or challenge rights-oriented moral cultures.
- **Violence and Peace:** In chapter 21, R. Scott Appleby examines the reputation of modern religion as a major social and political obstacle to the full realization of human rights. He also questions whether religious actors have the potential as peacemakers to establish a fully recognized right to peace.
- **Religion and the State:** W. Cole Durham authored the book's final chapter, which investigates the different relationships between religion, secularism, and state

structures.

Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction is a product of Law, Religion, and Human Rights in International Perspective, a program of the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at Emory University.