

Human Rights and Freemasonry

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Brief reflections on the 60th anniversary of the
Universal Declaration on Human Rights

Worshipful Master
Dear Brethren

On the 10th of December 1948, across the Seine from the Eiffel Tower -at the Palais Chaillot- the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The Declaration had been written by a specially appointed Commission consisting of eight members, among whom was the Chilean representative, Ambassador Hernán Santa Cruz, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt and with the support of a secretariat headed by the distinguished Canadian jurist John Peters Humphrey, convening a number of countries from around the World, with different socio-economic, religious, and ethnic backgrounds. The General Assembly approved the proposed text by a recorded vote of 48 in favor, to 0 against, with 8 abstentions: the Soviet Union, Byelorussian, Ukrainian, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Saudi Arabia, Yugoslavia, and South Africa. The Declaration, prompted by the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime in the thirties and forties, was inspired by a tradition of enlightenment going back generations, and by a morally fueled activism that had gained momentum during the preceding decades. Since then, a number of treaties, declarations and conventions, have shaped what today is understood as an international framework for the enforcement of Human Rights. Most civilized communities have adopted, in these sixty years, the basic principles stated in the Declaration in their own constitutions and legal bodies, and crimes against Humanity are prosecuted in international courts.

As stated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations, "...the Declaration recognizes that the *'inherent dignity of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world'* and is linked to the recognition of fundamental rights towards which every human being aspires, namely the right to life, liberty and security of person; the right to an adequate standard of living; the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution; the right to own property; the right to freedom of opinion and expression; the right to education, freedom of thought, conscience and religion; and the right to freedom from torture and degrading treatment, among others. These are inherent rights to be enjoyed by all human beings of the global village - men, women and children, as well as by any group of society, disadvantaged or not -and not "gifts" to be withdrawn, withheld or granted at someone's whim or will."ⁱ

Human Rights are political norms intended to regulate how people should

be treated by their government and institutions. They are not, therefore, ordinary moral norms applying mainly to interpersonal conduct, but they impose duties to those in power, in order to avoid potential abuse. They represent minimal standards, concerned with *avoiding the terrible rather than with achieving the best* and, as such, they leave room for local adaptation at the national level, allowing cultural and socioeconomic variations. As rights, they have right holders and addressees who are assigned duties or responsibilities, requiring governments not only refraining from doing some actions, but also taking positive steps to provide basic goods.ⁱⁱ

Human Rights, like Freemasonry, are a legacy of Enlightenment and a product of the eighteenth century. That period of history saw a deep moral transformation of society, through which human beings came to see themselves as autonomous, self-possessed creatures, recognizing other human beings as similarly autonomous creatures deserving equal respect. This profound psychological change created a new capacity of people to empathize across social boundaries, and a previously inexistent sense of universal brotherhood of all mankindⁱⁱⁱ. It was the period of human history in which Reason was advocated as the main source of authority.

It should not be seen, therefore, as mere coincidence that one of the members of the Commission in charge of drafting the Declaration, the French lawyer and philosopher André Cassin, compared the included rights to the portico of a temple. According to Cassin's view the first two articles of the declaration represent the courtyard steps of the portico and stand for human dignity, shared by all individuals regardless of their religion, ethnicity, or sex. The first pillar represents articles 3 to 11 and covers the rights of individuals to life and liberty. The second pillar, comprising articles 12 to 17, confers civil and property rights. The third, stretching from articles 18 to 21, alludes to political and social rights; and the fourth, from 22 to 27, encompasses economic and cultural rights. These courtyard and pillars support articles 28 and 30, the roof of the portico, stating that humans possess not only rights, but also duties to the community "in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible" and that everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in the Declaration can be fully realized. With an obvious enlightened –and French– inspiration Cassin identified these four pillars as representing dignity, liberty, equality, and fraternity^{iv}.

Freemasonry recognizes these values as those representing the basic tools that mankind should use for the construction of the Universal Temple of Humanity: the level, the plumb, the square, and compasses are the jewels that initiation gives us, to enlighten our minds in the recognition of charity as the most precious virtue to be sought, being the very cement of the Temple that Society has erected to Human Rights.

Recognizing the primacy of Human Rights, however, is not a mere rhetoric or intellectual exercise. As Freemasons, we should always bear in mind the question posed by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt: "Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home -so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere. Without concerned citizen action to uphold them close to home, we shall look in vain for progress in the larger world."^v

R.S.

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ⁱ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: A Magna Carta for all humanity*. URL = < <http://www.unhchr.ch/udhr/miscinfo/carta.htm> >.

ⁱⁱ Nickel, James, "*Human Rights*", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2008 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

ⁱⁱⁱ Hunt, Lynn. *Inventing Human Rights: a History*. New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2007.

^{iv} Ishay, Micheline. *The Human rights Reader*, 2nd ed. New York and London: Routledge, 2007.

^v Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Op.cit.