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Rats, Cockroaches and
People Like Us
Views of Humanity and Human Rights

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Rector,
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Excellencies, distinguished colleagues and students of the ISS, ladies and gentlemen,
People like me:

Many people appear to believe that there are a growing number of religious conflicts in the world, particularly since the end of the Cold War. On closer examination, however, it seems that the number of conflicts of the type which are today often labelled 'ethnic' or 'religious' has in fact been growing since the 1950s[1]. Many such conflicts were already detectable in the period of the Cold War, but at that time, they were usually interpreted within a framework of East-West relations.

There has, without doubt, been a change in the patterns of violent conflict in the world since the end of the Cold War, but above all there has been a massive shift in perceptions. Among the world's recent conflicts which are now seen as primarily religious in nature are, for example, Bosnia, Algeria, Kashmir, Chechnya, Indonesia and others. This development is one reason for a growing interest in religion in relation to human rights, a subject which, it may even be argued, has been one of the main features of the human rights debate in recent years.[2] Many people in the West, where secular politics are considered the norm, seem to have come to the conclusion that religion is all

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1. Tim Allen & Jean Seaton (eds.), *The media of conflict: War reporting and representations of ethnic violence.* London and New York: Zed Books, 1999, pp. 11-42, and esp. p.22.
2. A wealth of literature has been produced during the last ten years, which in various ways introduces religion as a critical factor in human rights matters, not only in relation to conflict. Cf. David Little, 'Rethinking human rights: a review essay on religion, relativism and other matters', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 27 , no. 1, 1999, pp. 151-177.

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too often a negative aspect of human culture, that it divides people rather than unites them. As a result, there exists a widely-held belief today that religion is responsible for abuses of human rights more often than it is a factor in their protection.

This contrasts rather sharply with the period before the 1990s, when academics as well as policymakers often failed to appreciate the significance of religion in the political realm because of an undiscriminating belief in the inevitability of secularization. We may now see that secular pressures often in fact strengthen religious belief.[3] The emergence of a worldwide vibrant political Islam may be considered as one telling example; similar tendencies towards a return to the fundamentals of faith can also be discerned within other major religious traditions.[4]

Some views of human rights

Until the last years of the twentieth century, secularism appeared to political elites throughout the world to be an unstoppable force, and human rights to be very largely a matter of legislation. Hence, in the academic field, the debate on human rights, including in matters concerning religion, has been dominated by experts on international law and other jurists. On occasion, theologians and scholars of religion have also added their voices, but without developing any systematic analysis of the relationship between religion and human rights.

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3. *Ib.*: 55. Cf. also Jeff Haynes, *Religion in global politics.* London and New York: Longman, 1998.
4. For a recent analysis of political Islam, see John L. Esposito (ed.), *Political Islam: Revolution, radicalism, or reform?* Boulder and London: Lynne Riener, 1997. For a general overview and analysis of fundamentalism in different religious traditions in the world, see the five volumes which have emerged from the Fundamentalism Project carried out by the University of Chicago under the leadership of Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby. See notably volume one: *Accounting for fundamentalisms: The dynamic character of movements.* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Systematic thought has been more forthcoming from ethical philosophers, both in the Western and non-Western world.[5] A contribution from this quarter is hardly surprising considering that the moral dimension of human activity is of central concern to the human rights debate.

Nowhere do these remarks apply with greater pertinence than in discussion of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. This is now often interpreted primarily as a legal document, which no doubt for this reason has received most attention from scholars working within the field of law. In retrospect, more than fifty years after the Declaration, it is becoming clear that legal instruments are not enough if human rights are to be firmly grounded in different cultures, as people's understanding of human rights is informed by their own world views and cosmologies. It is plain that in many countries human rights ideology finds its theoretical justification in religion. Yet, the human rights concept as expressed in the Universal Declaration is at root a secular idea. For it seems that of all the cultural factors which affect views of humanity and human rights in different parts of the world, none is more important than religion. It is as a consequence of such different viewpoints that today a number of other human rights declarations exist which reflect the particular world view of their designers.[6] Although the emergence of alternative declarations has often been politically inspired, the fact that the

5. One leading example is the *Journal of Religious Ethics*, published in the United States. See notably the special issue on human rights, vol. 26, no. 2, 1998.
6. Notably the Cairo Declaration on Human Rights in Islam of 1993, which has been adopted by some fifty member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC). Earlier, in 1981, a Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights (UIDHR) was drafted under the auspices of the Islamic Council, a London-based organization affiliated with the Muslim World League. Apart from these, there are various documents concerning Islamic human rights policy. More recently, a debate has emerged on Asian values in human rights, which resulted in the so-called Bangkok Declaration. This Declaration was drafted at a regional preparatory meeting in Bangkok prior to the Second World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993.

Universal Declaration conceives human rights in a purely secular mode is nevertheless a matter of genuine concern for many otherwise sympathetic observers, notably outside the Western world.[7]

Clearly, if we wish for a successful inculturation of human rights, we must give serious thought to the role played by religion.[8] For most people in the world, religion is an integral part of their existence, inseparable from the social and moral order, and it defines their relations with other human beings. If relations between human beings are central to the concept of human rights, it becomes important to consider whether, in any given society, these relations have been informed by a religious world view or whether the philosophical basis is a secular one. In the case of the former, believers often feel that the way in which they perceive the world does not find sufficient recognition in the Universal Declaration. We may say, with hindsight, that the Universal Declaration is itself a product of the secular developments that I referred to earlier on. The phrase 'human rights', after all, implies two separate concepts: the existence of human beings, and the

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7. This became clear, for example, during the meeting of the Parliament of the World's Religions in Cape Town in December 1999, which contained a number of panels on religion and human rights.
8. Many observers have commented on the need for the inculturation of human rights. Some examples are: Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im (ed.), *Human rights in cross-cultural perspective* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992); David Little, John Kelsay & Abulaziz Sachedina, *Human rights and the conflict of cultures* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988); and Wolfgang Schmale (ed.), *Human rights and cultural diversity: Europe, Arabic-Islamic world, Africa, China* (Goldbach: Keip, 1993). More specifically on the role of religion, see for example: Irene Bloom, J. Paul Martin & Wayne L. Proudfoot (eds.), *Religious diversity and human rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); John Kelsay & Sumner B. Twiss (eds.), *Religion and human rights* (New York: The Project on Religion and Human Rights, 1995); John Witte & John van de Vyver (eds.), *Religious human rights in global perspective. Vol. I: Religious perspectives* (Den Haag: Kluwer, 1996). For a historical and comparative perspective, see also Yael Danieli, Elsa Stamatopoulos & Clarence J. Dias (eds.), *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Fifty years and beyond* (Amityville, New York: Baywood Publishing Company, 1999).

assertion that they have inalienable rights. Scholarly debate on the Universal Declaration invariably turns upon the nature of these rights and ways of applying them, without questioning the notion of a human being. That is, in addressing the fundamental question of a human's rights and the universal application of these, the Declaration takes it for granted that we all agree upon what precisely *is* a human being. The question regarding the actual nature of a human being is in many cases deemed to be a metaphysical one, and is therefore often expressed in religion. To avoid any misunderstanding, I am not arguing that there is anything fundamentally flawed in the Universal Declaration; what I am saying is that in view of what we know now, one may consider that perhaps it is simply not explicit enough in certain areas. In the view of many, it lacks a profound view of what a human being is.

Interestingly, the same point has recently been made by Vaclav Havel, when he asks why human beings have the prerogative to enjoy human rights. The answer he has advanced resembles that of many non-Western critics. 'I am convinced', he states, ' that the deepest roots of what we now call human rights lie somewhere beyond us, and above us; somewhere deeper than the world of human covenants - a realm that I would, for simplicity's sake, describe as metaphysical'.[9] One viable course, in his view, out of the problems that may arise from a difference in world view over the interpretation of human rights, is placing emphasis on their spiritual source. We should make an effort, he argues, to highlight the spiritual dimension and spiritual origin of the values guarded by the United Nations and translate this into the Organization's practical activities.[10] Whatever our personal views on this may be, it seems evident that present circumstances require a rethinking of the relationship between religion and human rights. This is necessary in order to address some of the changes that have taken

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9. Vaclav Havel, in Danieli *et al.*, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, p. 332.
10. *Ib.*, p. 333-4.

place in recent decades and which have shed new light on the role of religion in human rights matters.

Consideration of the place of religion in the social and political circumstances of today's world raises a number of important questions, not all of which can be discussed here and now. I will limit myself to discussing only those points which I believe need our most urgent scholarly attention. I will mention three in this address, which I will discuss in a particular order. I will begin with the most widely recognized of the debates raised by notions of globalization in regard to human rights, namely the issue of cultural relativism. Second, I will review the relationship between religion and culture, which, in my view, takes the inquiry further. Finally, I will conclude with what seems to me to lie at the heart of the matter, namely the way in which many of the world's people conceive of a human being in partly spiritual terms. The third and last of these points is particularly important since the question of human rights is bound up with a given society's fundamental view of what one author refers to as 'what sort of thing a human being is'[11]. This really is a consideration of the elements which separate human beings from other categories and by virtue of which they may enjoy certain rights.

Cultural relativism

The task of providing a common moral language for all humanity is fraught with difficulties. The central paradox here is that achieving such a goal requires a prior development of an indigenous human rights language within the various moral traditions of the world.[12] Given the state of affairs in the world today, there is increasing doubt as to whether a worldwide consensus on human rights can ever be

11. Thurman, in Bloom *et al.*, *Religious diversity and human rights*, p. 90.
12. James Turner Johnson, 'Human rights and violence in contemporary context', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1998, p. 326.

achieved. In a controversial essay published in 1993 Samuel Huntington suggested that certain differences between peoples and populations can never be bridged.[13] His argument is that there is a fundamental incompatibility between different types of civilization, whose traditions have been shaped over centuries. The most important source of conflict in the world today, in his view, is not ideological or economic but cultural. According to Huntington, we are experiencing a clash of civilizations in the world, in which religion plays a major role. Since there is no prospect of unity being created out of the world's cultural diversity, he proposes that the Western world should accept that these cultural 'fault lines' exist. Western countries should therefore rather strive for unity within their own cultural field, and cooperate primarily with those whose cultures are closest to their own.

Huntington's line of thought, which has been influential though much-criticized,[14] is at odds with the vision of the Universal Declaration, which maintains that there are certain values which are shared by all peoples.[15] Huntington's outlook, however, stands in a long tradition. I may cite, for example, the precedent offered by the American Anthropological Society which in 1947 opposed the adoption of a Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the grounds that individual cultures had their own standards and values, and later accused the drafters of ethnocentrism.[16] American anthropologists of

13. Samuel P. Huntington, 'The clash of civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, 1993, pp. 22-49. The argument was further elaborated in his book *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
14. See later issues of *Foreign Affairs*, notably vol. 72, no 4.
15. Many of these, incidentally, are considered to be present in most, if not all, religions. This is a view commonly held, in any case, by religious believers themselves, as well as by those who have been writing specifically on the subject of religion and human rights.
16. See Johannes Morsink's 'Introduction: The Declaration at fifty', in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, drafting and intent.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

fifty years ago, like Samuel Huntington today, found it hard to believe that human beings may find ways to transcend their cultural divides. Rather than the cultural fault lines identified by Huntington, the vision embodied in the Universal Declaration acknowledges the existence of a cultural weave underlying a common human pattern. If we accept this to be so, it means that in human rights thinking the human is the fundamental category, and not culture.[17] Such matters are ultimately a matter of faith, which is why belief in the universality of human rights is sometimes referred to as a secular religion.

In view of this type of culturalist critique, it is important to remind ourselves that the Universal Declaration was the work of a team of both Western and non-Western drafters, standing in different religious traditions.The core group of eight drafters comprised representatives from Australia, Chile, China, France, Lebanon, the former Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and the United States.[18] In the final phase, only eight of the 58 states involved in the process decided to abstain from voting on adoption of the Declaration, including South Africa, the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia.[19] It is significant that none of the dissenters voted against the Declaration.

The drafters of this document clearly considered how to make a universal appeal to people of different cultures, for their aim was to communicate a vision to ordinary people, men and women from all walks

17. Cf. Irene Bloom, 'Religious diversity and human rights: an introduction', in Bloom et al, *Religious diversity and human rights*, pp. 1-11, notably pp. 2-3.
18. When we look at the composition of the General Assembly, we see that of the 58 national representatives 37, i.e. a majority, stood in the Judeo-Christian tradition, 11 in the Islamic, 6 in the Marxist and 4 in the Buddhist tradition. There was, however, a notable under-representation from Asia and Africa. For a detailed record, see Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Ch. 1: 'The drafting process explained'.
19. *Ib.*, p. (21-27). We should mention here the significant influence of some Muslim drafters, and also the strong influence of notably Latin American socialists, to whom we owe the inclusion of social, economic and cultural rights in the Declaration.

of life in all parts of the world. Such a vision has great mobilizing power, which is precisely what governments and others wielding political power often fear in the Universal Declaration. Its claim to universality, I would argue, lies much more in its conviction that it can be shared by all people, whoever and wherever they are, than in the likelihood that its principles will actually be respected by political elites. The principal aim of the Declaration was thus an educational one: every person was to be aware of certain fundamental values in order to prevent a repeat of the horrors which had occurred during the Second World War with its 50 million dead, only months before the Declaration was drafted.

In his book *Modernity and the Holocaust* the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has argued that the atrocities of the Second World War were made possible by the systematic repression of the moral dimension of people's acts in modern industrial society.[20] If this is so, it is all the more disturbing because 'modernity', as it is often referred to,[21] has today made inroads in all societies worldwide. The globalization of life which has accompanied modernity has given a new impulse to the debate on universalism versus particularism in human rights. The argument in favour of universality may be strengthened by the observation that in a globalized world, norms and values are likely to be influenced by the process of globalization. On the other hand, it is increasingly argued outside the Western world, by politicians especially, that globalization threatens the specific identity of individual societies. Every country therefore (or so it is argued) should be

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20. Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989.
21. Theorists of globalization make a distinction between the first and the second modernity. Whereas in the first modernity there was an equation of state, society and identity, in the second modernity this equation is undermined by new developments inherent in the processes of globalization. The most important dimensions of globalization are considered to be communications technology, ecology, economics, work organization, culture and civil society. See Ulrich Beck, *What is globalization?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000, notably p. 19.

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allowed to develop its own particular philosophy of human rights, based on its own cultural values. In many cases this is explicitly related to the religious morality of a particular culture or society. The Islamic Declaration on Human Rights is one example. Another is the Bangkok Declaration, drafted in the early 1990s by some forty states from the Asian and Pacific region, which made a plea to consider 'the significance of national and regional particularities and various historical, cultural and religious backgrounds' in interpreting and applying human rights.[22] Culture-related values, however, as feminist writers especially have pointed out, can be very oppressive for social and religious minorities inasmuch as they tend to deny cultural and religious diversity within a given society.[23]

It is notable that a related debate has arisen in Western societies, such as Europe and North America, in the form of the heated issue of multiculturalism. The argument here turns upon the degree to which our societies should encourage minority groups to nurture specific cultural and religious identities. Inherent in this is a perception similar to that of the Islamic and Asian activists whom I have just mentioned: namely, that certain groups of people are so different from us as to require different treatment, in conformity with those norms and values which are deemed to be their own. Some influential analysts, including Kwame Anthony Appiah and Michael Ignatieff, have labelled this view the 'narcissism of minor difference'.[24] Labelling people as 'not like us' always concerns matters of identity – who are we and who are they? The merits of the argument must be examined case by case. For example, I have argued elsewhere in regard to

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22. Quoted in Little, 'Rethinking human rights', p. 153.
23. See e.g. Harriet Samuel's discussion of this in her article, 'Hong Kong on women, Asian values, and the law', *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1999, pp. 707-734.
24. See Michael Ignatieff, *The warrior's honor: Ethnic war and the modern conscience*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997, p. 54. See also Kwame Anthony Appiah in an interview with *de Volkskrant* on 23 October 1999 commenting on his essay 'Color conscious: the political morality of race'.

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African immigrants in Europe that it is often Europeans, and not Africans themselves, who insist on the need for Africans to develop their own (meaning African) identity. In effect such an argument becomes a mechanism of exclusion, a discourse which contributes to the defence of Fortress Europe.[25]

Perceptions of human difference are inseparable from perceptions of identity. Whether we are discussing human rights in the international arena or group rights within multicultural societies, it is of crucial importance to establish who is the agent in defining people's identities. Who precisely is advocating a position of exception, and for whom? Often, it is not the victims but the violators of human rights who use a relativist argument against the principle of universality.[26] One instance is that of the late President Mobutu of Zaire, who argued that his country should be exempt from international norms on the grounds that Zaireans had their own authentic way of doing things. Conversely, relatively powerless indigenous groups may seek to protect their communal rights by invoking universal values and associating themselves with global movements.[27]

Any claim to exception of the sort I have described carries a risk of political manipulation. This includes claims made on religious grounds. The political manipulation of religion has been evident, for example, in the last Balkan wars, notably in forging a link between religion and nationalism. Religious identities there gained an overriding importance in recent years as a result of the extreme violence of

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25. Gerrie ter Haar, *Halfway to paradise: African Christians in Europe*. Cardiff: Cardiff Academic Press, 1998.
26. As Jackie Selebi, then Director-General of the South African Department of Foreign Affairs, pointed out at a ceremony in Geneva on 12 August 1998 when he received a human rights award.
27. One interesting example has been recorded by Sally Engle Merry, 'Legal pluralism and transnational culture: the *Ka Ho'okolokolonui Kanaka Maoli* tribunal, Hawai'i, 1993', in Richard A. Wilson (ed.), *Human rights, culture and context: Anthropological perspectives*. London and Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997, pp. 28-48.

the conflict. It has been argued that it is not religion, but a 'politics of identity' which turned minor differences into major divides and set different believers against each other.[28] This may equally prove true of situations of conflict between religious groups in other parts of the world where people previously lived in relative harmony.

Conflict is often exacerbated when religion becomes a tool in the hands of politicians or political interest groups and is thus used to create, maintain or strengthen a factional position. It is the political manipulation of religion which causes secularists to mistrust religiously inspired arguments about human rights. Indeed, there can be no doubt that religion may easily be associated with the violation of human rights. But this observation is not sufficient to disqualify religious belief as an instrument for the propagation and protection of human rights. In some countries it is argued that the secular ideology of the state is itself a root cause of, and not the solution to, religious violence, because it fails to take account of the religious values of citizens. This is the case in India, for example, where some thoughtful scholars advocate the creation of a state based on the original Hindu tradition of religious tolerance.[29] The fact is that in any society where a substantial number of people profess religious belief, religion has a role to play in protecting human rights, just as it can have a role in violating them.

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28. Ger Duyzings, *Religion and the politics of identity in Kosovo*. London: Hurst & Co., 1999.
29. Cf. Dick Kooijman, 'Religieuze tolerantie en seculiere staat in India', *Wereld en Zending*, 1999, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 97-106. One leading intellectual advocating this point of view is the social psychologist Ashis Nandy; see notably his essay 'The politics of secularism and the recovery of religious tolerance' in Veena Das (ed.), *Mirrors of violence: Communities, riots and survivors in South Asia.* Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992.

In other words, we should not deny the legitimacy of various societies developing their own methods for solving problems of human rights.[30] In fact, sensitivity to cultural diversity is, in my view, a precondition for the successful inculturation of human rights. But cultural sensitivity – an open-mindedness about the potentials of unfamiliar cultures – is not the same as cultural relativism. Whereas the former makes possible a process of dialogue which can be mutually enriching, the latter leads to a separate development of human rights.

Religion and culture

The tendency to emphasize differences between cultures rather than to focus on what may bind them leads to some important philosophical questions. The most pressing of these is perhaps, in view of our subject, the question whether cultural particularism breeds moral particularism. In other words, if we adhere to the primacy of cultural diversity, on the grounds that there exists a range of specific cultural identities, can we at the same time uphold the existence of moral standards which override a particular cultural tradition, such as those embedded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? If not, the only logical alternative is to believe that each culturally defined entity should adopt its own separate human rights standards. This, we may note, is the logical corollary of both Huntington's argument about cultural difference and of the more extreme advocates of multiculturalism within Western societies. This is an unappealing prospect in my view. Rather, we should aim to develop global moral connec-

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30. We may quote in this connection Richard A. Wilson, who states that 'It is possible to have contextualization without relativization, since one can keep open the possibility, and in the dying embers of the twentieth century, the likelihood, that contexts are interlinked through a variety of processes.' Just because a cultural form is global, he argues, it does not mean that everyone relates to it in the same way ('Human rights, culture and context: an introduction', in Wilson, *Human rights, culture and context*, p. 12).

tions, asking ourselves what moral relationships a global culture creates. This has also been suggested by Michael Ignatieff, who calls for a type of involvement which will be 'a crucial new feature of the modern moral imagination'.[31] Since religion is the idiom in which many people express their views about the world, it will need to be part of such a moral imagination.

I should say at this juncture that the conventional Western idea of what religion is, and the way we apply this to the issue of human rights, has been much influenced by the so-called world religions.[32] The concept of world religions is normally applied to religions based on a written authority, notably Christianity and Islam. Scholars and others often contrast these with so-called ethnic religions, usually meaning in effect religions which have no sacred book but which are based on oral traditions. In such a classification, 'ethnic religions' are connected to a specific ethnic group or 'tribe' and its culture. Such notions were coined during colonial times by the West in regard to people not like us, and are intrinsically connected to concepts of race. In our time, the concept of ethnicity has come to replace the nineteenth-century concept of race in the definition of perceived differences between human populations.[33] The main attraction of using the term 'ethnic' appears to lie in its usefulness in the process of 'othering', that is in distinguishing systematically between 'us' and 'them'.[34]

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31. Michael Ignatieff, *The warrior's honor*, pp. 5 and 98.
32. For a scholarly and critical analysis of the term 'religion' in different historical and social contexts, see Jan G. Platvoet & Arie L. Molendijk (eds.), *The pragmatics of defining religion: Contexts, concepts and contests*. Leiden: Brill, 1999; notably the Epilogue by Platvoet, 'Contexts, concepts and contests: towards a pragmatics of defining religion', pp. 463-516.
33. In his book *Race and ethnicity in modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), the sociologist David Mason provides analytical insight into the mechanisms involved in this process, drawing attention to the important distinction between difference and diversity.
34. See, for example, the critical comments made by Teresia Hinga in a short essay, 'Inculturation and the otherness of Africans: some reflections', in a volume

In the same vein, ethnic religions tend to be regarded as innate, closed and static in character, and thus different from world religions, which are deemed open to all peoples and conscious of a universal vocation.[35]

This view, although conventional, is today in dire need of revision, not only because it is not congruent with observable facts, but also because it gives comfort to cultural relativists. 'World' or 'universal' religions have developed firm roots in local cultures around the world as a consequence of modern processes of globalization. An unprecedented diversity has arisen within these religions, which is evidenced by popular forms of religious expression. In such cases, interpretation of scripture is increasingly adapted to the local context of the believers. At the same time, a movement has taken place in the opposite sense, as so-called 'ethnic' or 'tribal' religions are increasingly taking on universal characteristics. This is so, for example, with African traditional religions, which can be found in various parts of the world.[36] Formerly this was a consequence of the transatlantic slave trade; today African religious traditions have travelled overseas through the international migration that is a hallmark of modern globalization. Yoruba religion is now more flourishing in New York

about the perceived otherness of Africa, *Inculturation: Abide by the otherness of Africa and Africans*, edited by Peter Turkson & Frans Wijsen, Kampen: Kok, 1994, pp. 10-18.
35. In some cases, world religions have proven to be a colonial invention. This is the case with Hinduism, which was constructed by the British in the 19th century as a unitary national religion, a process which some have described as the 'semitification' of Hinduism in the modern era. Thare are also scholars who argue that being Hindu has no religious connotation whatsoever. See Richard King, 'Orientalism and the modern myth of "Hinduism"', *Numen*, vol. XLVI, no. 2, 1999, pp. 146-185.
36. Universalization is only one remarkable tendency in the current process of revitalization of African traditional religions. See Rosalind Hackett, 'Revitalization in African Traditional Religion', in Jacob K. Olupona (ed.), *African traditional religions in contemporary society*. New York: Paragon House, 1991, pp. 135-149.

than in Lagos. Muslim brotherhoods are making converts in Chicago and are firmly established in southern Europe. There are churches founded by Africans which have now become international, and which have branches a few kilometres from where we are now sitting.[37] Processes of inculturation and contextualization have caused so-called world religions and ethnic religions to resemble each other more closely in structure. Both have become grounded in the particular culture where they are being practiced, all over the world.

These dynamics of change need to be considered in any up-to-date analysis of the relationship between religion and human rights. Only then can we aim to make the global moral connections that are needed if basic human rights are to be upheld worldwide.

Being human

If anything can be said about the great diversity of religions in the world, it is that they all perceive good and evil to be part of the human condition. They concern themselves with exploring the nature of these qualities, the relationship between them, and methods of keeping these two forces under control. 'The wise man', states the Moroccan sociologist Muhammad Guessous, commenting on what his fellow-countrymen believe to be the essence of a human being, 'is the man who does not expect good things in this life but who takes precautions to minimize the evil.'[38]

To minimize evil, Guessous observes, Moroccans believe that a person needs to do two things: to work hard and to worship. *Ora et labora*, others might say. Most religious traditions recognize the need to worship in order to minimize evil, meaning everything which is seen

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37. Gerrie ter Haar, *Halfway to paradise*.
38. Quoted in Kevin Dwyer, *Arab voices: The human rights debate in the Middle East*. London: Routledge, 1991, p. 119.

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as reducing the quality of human life, including illness, poverty and death. Religious believers are ultimately aware that successful living is dependent on their relationship with an invisible world, which they believe to be inhabited by spiritual forces that can make their presence felt in the visible world. Religious practice, therefore, consists to a large extent in a skillful manipulation of these unseen forces in order to manage the good and evil humans experience in their lives.

All societies have some concept of evil, and of the way in which human beings are implicated. In many societies such ideas are expressed through discourses of religion. Accusations of witchcraft, for example, are one way in which people may express the notion that evil can take on a human form.[39] The belief in witchcraft is a popular one, in the sense that it is widely held, notably but not only in Africa. It expresses an essentially religious idea about human nature, which may find a different expression in other cultures. For, even where religion has been abandoned as an explanatory model, secular ideologies have emerged which deal with the same question of how to manage and ward off manifestations of evil.

Both religious and secular ideologies tend to ascribe evil notably to those who are not considered people 'like us'. Both types of ideology have shown a capacity to destroy the lives of others by placing them outside the category of humans. The way in which this happens may differ, but in all cases it implies some form of disqualification as a person. In 1914, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace observed in relation to a war between Greece and Bulgaria that 'Day

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39. A point in case is present-day South Africa, where in certain parts of the country witchcraft accusations have become so frequent that the national government has set up various organs to try and tackle what has become a grave social problem which has led in recent years to the violent death of hundreds of people. Under the umbrella of SANPAD, the South Africa-Netherlands Programme on Alternatives in Development sponsored by the Dutch government, a research programme has been developed with the title 'Crossing witchcraft barriers in South Africa'.

after day the Bulgarians were represented in the Greek press as a race of monsters, and public feeling was roused to a pitch of chauvinism which made it inevitable that war, when it should come, should be ruthless.... Deny that your enemies are men and you will treat them as vermin'.[40] Something similar happened during the Second World War, when whole groups were described as not fully human, not 'people like us'. Anti-Arab pogroms in 1950s Algeria were known to French settlers as *'ratonnades'* or 'rat-hunts'. In preparation for the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, the organs of state and mass communication consistently conveyed the message that part of the population were actually 'cockroaches'.[41] Examples from all parts of the world indicate how effective and how lethal dehumanising is as a mechanism of exclusion. It denies humanity to a person or a group. It is one extreme of the process of 'othering', or the constitution of a primal opposition between 'us' and 'them'. Nevertheless, it is necessary to recall, this is a process which takes place permanently in less radical forms in all societies. It is for that reason that minority groups are everywhere in a vulnerable position. When their otherness becomes justified by an ideology either religious or secular, they risk different treatment on the grounds that they *are*, after all, different. Hence, they may be deemed to have fewer rights than people like us, or even no rights at all.

This clearly has major implications for human rights, which are claims that individuals are entitled to make simply by virtue of their status as human beings. It raises a question not so much about the nature of rights, as about the nature of humanity. In any particular culture or society, what do people think constitutes a human being? And who is therefore qualified to claim human rights? In most cases, the answer is to be found in the belief system of people. These questions are fundamental for understanding the relationship between religion

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40. Quoted in Allen & Seaton, *The media of conflict*, p. 46.
41. See Alison Des Forges, *Leave none to tell the story: Genocide in Rwanda*. New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999.

and human rights. In many cultures, people attach overwhelming importance to the spiritual dimension of a person, believing that it is this which defines him or her as possessing a truly human identity.[42] In other cases, human identity is not considered a fixed category, but something fluid. In some forest countries of West Africa, for example, it is widely believed that people closely resemble certain animals, including leopards and chimpanzees, and may even take on some of their characteristics.[43] Similar examples can be found all over the world. New Zealand, for example, recently became the first country to recognise in law the status of the great apes, as man's closest relatives. This step was taken on the basis of scientific evidence that the great apes share not only our genes but also basic human traits such as self-awareness and intelligence.[44]

Societies, moreover, hold different views about the precise point at which true human life may be identified, and when it ceases. In some cultures, very young children may be lawfully killed on the grounds that they are not, or not yet, really human. A similar debate on the definition of humanity takes place in Western societies today, in relation to such questions as abortion, euthanasia, and gene technology. In many places, theologians or other religious specialists decide upon such matters. In Western society, questions such as these are now

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42. Among the Akan in Ghana or the Yoruba in Nigeria, for example, the spiritual
   , dimension of a person is deemed an essential part of the human condition. We
   find similar ideas in all parts of the world, where the human world and the spirit
   world are believed to be interrelated in a way which has become uncommon in
   the West.
43. Paul Richards, 'Local understandings of primates and evolution: some Mende
   beliefs concerning chimpanzees', in R. Corbey & B. Theunissen (eds.), *Ape,
   man, apeman: Changing views since 1600*. Leiden: Dept. of Prehistory, Leiden
   University, 1995, pp. 265-273. See also Stephen Ellis, *The mask of anarchy:
   The destruction of Liberia and the religious dimension of an African civil war.*
   London: Hurst & Co., 1999: esp. pp. 220-280.
44. 'New Zealand gives human rights to great apes', *Noseweek,* Dec. 1999/Jan.
   2000, no. 28, p. 12.

largely referred to experts in medical ethics. By replacing the theologians, they have become the secular moralists of our time.

Conclusion

Let me summarize my argument at this point.

Present circumstances, I have argued, require a reconsideration of the relationship between religion and human rights. Religion, or religious belief, I suggest, while often seen as a root cause of violent conflict, is in fact a particular expression of human sentiments and ideas which are also present in secular cultures. In most cases the outbreak of violence cannot be ascribed to the nature of religious belief as such since, like all human institutions, religion can be used for either constructive or destructive purposes. Its resources can be applied both for the protection of human rights and for their violation. The challenge is to try and exploit the positive resources which are present in virtually all religions.

So far, little use has been made by human rights promotors of the world's religious and spiritual resources.[45] An intelligent use of religious resources requires and presupposes a serious consideration of religion as an important factor in people's lives. In this one respect, we can agree with Huntington, when he concluded his sombre analysis with a call to develop a more profound understanding of the basic religious and philosophical assumptions underlying what he describes as 'other civilizations'.[46]

I have further argued that globalization contains, almost inevitably, a tendency towards the globalization of moral ideas in connection with

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45. One notable exception is the Parliament of the World's Religions, which gathers men and women from religious and spiritual traditions all over the world to discuss issues of common concern.

46. Huntington, 'The clash of civilizations?', p. 49.

human rights, whether these ideas are based on a religious or secular ideology. Consequently, cultural relativism, which demands a position of exception, is becoming an increasingly untenable stance. At the same time, it must be clear that universalizing human rights is not the same as Westernizing human rights. For the inculturation of human rights must be a two-way process, in which Western proponents of human rights learn and accept that certain values derived from a culture which is originally not theirs may actually be of use to them too. These may include religious values.

Finally, given the fact that human rights are claims that people are entitled to make simply because of being human, I have emphasized the importance for all of us, in and outside the Western world, of considering the fundamental question which underlies all human rights thought: what is a human being? This is necessary if we are to develop a proper understanding of the process which begins with labelling people as different from us, and which can lead, through excesses of language, to the grossest violation of human rights. The same question draws us towards ideas about good and evil which are prominent in many religions in the world and which to a greater or lesser extent guide people's actions towards others and thus have a bearing on human rights.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The profound changes that the world is experiencing today impel us to examine religion anew, as one of the agents of social change. The Chair which is being inaugurated today may be seen as a recognition of the importance of such an approach, notably in regard to human rights.

In the years to come I hope to investigate further some of the ideas which I have sketched in the last hour, notably in view of the role of

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religion in situations of conflict. In implementing such a programme, it is particularly important in my view to examine the views of ordinary believers in matters of human rights, and not limit ourselves to the views of religious and political elites. This implies focusing less on scriptural traditions than on ideas which are expressed in other forms. At the same time, any analysis of religion and human rights requires empirical study of the actual situations in which these ideas are expressed. For, as the British anthropologist Richard Wilson has noted, human rights are founded not in the eternal moral categories of social philosophy, but are the result of concrete social struggles.[47]

The debate on religion, human rights and social change is not an academic debate only. Its subject matter is of equal importance to all who are concerned about human rights in the world, or take an interest in understanding processes of change. I consider it my task to share academic insights with interested parties outside the academic world. As incumbent of the Chair I will therefore try and stimulate debate on relevant matters within a wider public circle. It is in this light that I would like to draw your attention to a forthcoming series of Open Seminars about 'Religious Fundamentalism and Social Change', organised at the ISS under the auspices of the Chair, which will start at the end of this month and will continue in May.

The Chair on Religion, Human Rights and Social Change is an Extraordinary Chair in more than one sense. As far as I am aware it has no equivalent in the world. We can all be grateful to the founders of the Chair – the organizations Cordaid, ICCO, and the World Conference for Religion and Peace – for having taken this unique initiative. It is a great privilege for me to be the first person to occupy this position. I would like to thank both the members of the Board and the Curatorium of the Foundation established in connection with the Chair for their active interest in the Chair and their support to its

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47. Wilson, *Human rights, culture and context*, p. 23.

incumbent. I greatly appreciate that, and I hope you will find that this new Chair will also benefit the work of the founding organizations.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to the Board of the Institute of Social Studies, which has welcomed this new Chair as part of its body. I strongly believe that the study of religion has an important contribution to make to the life of the Institute, not only in matters concerning human rights and social change, but also in fostering broader thought about development issues. I hope that any contribution I am able to make under the auspices of the Chair will help with the constant new thinking which is taking place in this field, both in this Institute and in the wider world.

I want to thank the ISS staff, both academic and administrative, for the way they have made me feel welcome in their midst. With your helpfulness you have made my arrival in this new environment a most pleasant one, and your forthcoming attitude has soon provided me with a sense of belonging. I feel among 'people like us'. I owe a special thanks to my colleagues in Staff Group 2 who, each in their own way, have contributed to my immediate job satisfaction. It is my greatest wish to be able to collaborate with you in the years to come in a mutually beneficial way. You can rest assured that I will do all that I can to further that aim.

To the ISS students I wish to say that I hope that you too will experience the new Chair and its activities as an asset to your work and your stay at the Institute. For me, your presence is a great challenge as it presents me with a unique opportunity to learn from your knowledge and experience, acquired in the various countries from which you have come.

As one should never forget where one comes from, I want to include in my thanks my colleagues and friends in the mundane business of the study of religion in various universities and departments. I thank you all for your continuing friendship and support. Since I am not planning to leave you, I am sure we will continue to cooperate.

Finally, life would not be worth living if one were not sustained by personal networks of affection. I therefore thank all of you who know you are dear to me for being with me today, as I know you will continue to be in the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, I thank you all for your attention.