Posters by the Voice of the Martyrs, "a non-profit, interdenominational organization with a vision for aiding Christians around the world who are being persecuted for their faith in Christ, fulfilling the Great Commission, and educating the world about the ongoing persecution of Christians" (www.persecution.com)
Theologizing Human Rights: Christian Activism and the Limits of Religious Freedom

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The ideal of universal human rights emerged as a global political project in the wake of the devastation and horrors of the Second World War and was codified, in 1948, in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and in 1950, in the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms. Subsequent conventions, declarations, and covenants have further specified and articulated this ideal on behalf of victims of genocide, refugees, women, children, the poor, victims of racism, the disabled, and so on. Apparently straightforward articulations of the rights of all human beings to dignity, civil liberty, self-determination, and socio-political and economic equality and well-being, these documents remain simultaneously idealized portraits of the as-yet-to-be-achieved and contested sites of struggle in the realm of the real.

The Enlightenment and its values haunt the contemporary world of human-rights discourses—their optimism, their universalism, their belief in the human capacity for solidarity, their insistence on the adequacy of the linguistic and conceptual framework of “rights” as the forum for negotiating competing claims, and their critique of the hegemony of religious authorities and institutions. Indeed, it is commonplace to trace the genealogy of contemporary human-rights arguments and stances back to a wide range of texts that have canonical or near-canonical status in the history of Western political thought: the English Bill of Rights, John Locke’s Letter Concerning Toleration, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1789, the U.S. Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, and other such foundational Enlightenment texts. (Less frequently do the contributions of socialist and feminist thought to the history of human-rights theory come centrally into view, despite their important role in shaping modern ideas about justice and rights.)

Meanwhile, scholars have long debated the proper, authoritative origins of human-rights discourses—whether secular or religious, ancient or modern, Western or global, universal or particular, and whether the answers to these sorts of binaries present obstacles to or opportunities for meaningful change on the ground. Questions about
origins can, of course, be illuminating both archaeologically and genealogically, but most origin stories also tend to serve particular contemporary interests or to feed into larger stories that underwrite claims to authority or legitimacy. Origins do not, or rather need not, determine the ongoing paths of a particular discourse.

Whatever the origins of human-rights discourses, what interests me in this essay is the relatively recent adoption of human-rights language, arguments, and values by specific activists: U.S. Christians (predominantly evangelical) working on particular strategic goals having to do with activism against religious persecution and advocacy for religious freedom. This adoption embraces the universalism of human rights as a framework and a domain in both practical and theological terms. It is part of a broader development within U.S. Protestant social and political engagement in recent years to put modes of argument grounded in the idioms of other social and political activist movements to work within a Christian frame. Such idioms draw on the histories of civil rights activism in the U.S., the rhetoric and strategies of identity politics, and the post-war emergence of a robust and internationally based human-rights movement.

The movements I identify here organize around a lengthy agenda of domestic and international concerns, and it is part of the political genius of these movements that they link the issues that they do. These movements first came to my attention when I began to track their collaborative work on issues of religious freedom and religious persecution. And it is especially within the context of work on religious freedom that the U.S. movement finds allies in certain European Christian organizations. So although this essay will focus on the political terrain I know best (that of the U.S.), I will also make reference to cognate discourses and modes of organization in Europe, since there are important parallels between movements, including important parallel tensions over theory, strategy, and tactics.

In the American context, two different, but complementary gestures characterize the movement’s appeal to human rights as a governing framework for activism: one involves the direct appeal to the moral authority of “human rights” as a category; the other involves framing “human rights” as the product of God’s authorship and authority, rather than as the articulation of a hard-won (if also always fragile) consensus that emerges out of human negotiation and deliberation. In other words, “human rights” may have historical roots in Enlightenment and secular ground, but for evangelical human-rights activists, God is ultimately the author of and authority for such rights. One can see how such logics work themselves out in the framework of one particular part of the human-rights agenda that has especially animated evangelical Christians: religious freedom.

Guarantees of religious freedom are codified in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.” Whereas the authors of the UDHR presumed the normative ground of the document to reside in notions of human
equality and solidarity, U.S. evangelical Christians who have taken up Article 18 as a prooftext for their organizing, by contrast, have made an explicitly theological originary claim for the normative ground of human rights. The founding document for evangelical activism in the mid-1990s, the “Statement of Conscience of the National Association of Evangelicals Concerning Worldwide Religious Persecution,” is a case in point. It concludes with these words:

Religious liberty is not a privilege to be granted or denied by an all-powerful state, but a God-given human right. Indeed, religious liberty is the bedrock principle that animates our republic and defines us as a people. We must share our love of religious liberty with other people who, in the eyes of God, are our neighbors. Hence, it is our responsibility, and that of the government that represents us, to do everything we can to secure the blessings of religious liberty to all those suffering religious persecution.

In this framing of the matter, God and the state (presumably a synecdoche for all human political institutions, whether nation-states or international bodies) are positioned in opposition to each other. The state is figured as a capricious (if all-powerful) entity, bestowing or withholding privileges on a whim, while God emerges as a faithful and reliable gift giver who confers irrevocable rights upon humanity. (There is, it should be noted, no mention here of, for example, Job 1:21: “The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away.”)

But there are other rhetorical effects of this framing of the matter. For one, if religious freedom is God-given, then it occupies a privileged position over any and all other human-rights claims. Any cursory consideration of the tensions within the human-rights framework comes to focus quickly on the potential conflicts that exist between human-rights claims of religious freedom, on the one hand, and human-rights claims by groups experiencing subordination, discrimination, or both, such as women and sexual minorities. One sees, in the American context, how claims of religious freedom by conservative Christians have been used to underwrite the legitimacy of hierarchical gender relations, the barring of women’s access to certain medical services, and discrimination against lesbians and gay men.

Two brief examples illustrate the point. In recent years, a growing number of Catholic and evangelical Protestant pharmacists in the U.S. have refused to fill prescriptions for contraception, including emergency contraception, arguing that to do so would violate their religious beliefs and therefore their religious freedom. As a result, a dizzying array of pieces of legislation to address all sides of this controversy has appeared on state legislatures’ dockets in recent years. Several states have passed laws allowing pharmacists to refuse to dispense these legal medications. In a different vein, conservative Christian groups in the United States have framed their opposition to hate-crimes legislation as a defense of religious freedom. Meanwhile, internationally, cross-religious alliances—between, for example, the Vatican and some Islamic leaders—have proven to be powerful obstacles to the realization of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) of 1979. This is
not to say that “religion” is uniquely responsible for discrimination based on gender or sexuality, but to notice how, in these examples, religious freedom trumps other forms of human freedom, especially reproductive and sexual freedom.⁹

Organizing around the global problem of religious persecution enjoyed a resurgence in the United States and Europe during the 1990s, although many of the organizations involved in such organizing have roots in Cold War Christian anti-Communist work. These organizations—the Voice of the Martyrs (VOM), Open Doors, and Christian Solidarity International, among others—now express their self-understanding primarily as Communism’s and Islam’s other. The appeals and public presentations of these organizations are similar in many respects. An examination of their publications, direct-mail campaign literature, and Internet presence suggests several things in common: all focus in particular on the situation of Christians around the world, a situation dubbed “the persecuted church.” (By putting this name in quotation marks, I wish to denote the heuristic function of the category, not to judge the truth claims of these organizations.)

The organizations involved in advocacy on behalf of the “persecuted church” and the promotion of religious freedom can be mapped onto a kind of continuum. On one end are organizations that are explicitly focused on Christianizing and missionizing; on the other are those that address themselves to broader structural changes and pursue activism within legislative contexts and international human-rights protocols.

Organizations on the Christianizing end of the continuum focus their activities on fundraising and direct service or action. They are explicit in their evangelizing goals, combining solidarity with missionary and evangelical outreach. This overlap between solidarity and support for the “persecuted church,” on the one hand, and missionary outreach to non-Christians, on the other, is immediately evident in even the most cursory review of the mission statements of these different organizations, of which the Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors are perhaps the best known.

The Voice of the Martyrs is the current name for an organization formerly called Jesus to the Communist World, which was founded in the 1960s by Richard Wurmbrand. The organization’s Web site describes it as “a non-profit, interdenominational organization with a vision for aiding Christians around the world who are being persecuted for their faith in Christ, fulfilling the Great Commission, and educating the world about the ongoing persecution of Christians.”¹⁰ The organization’s headquarters are now in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, from where it focuses on grassroots outreach and involving individuals in acts of solidarity and transnational missionizing. The activism of the Voice of the Martyrs blends two distinct projects: solidarity with persecuted Christians and evangelical missionary outreach. From the organization’s many publications, both print and electronic, it is clear that it situates its mandate in opposition to Communism and Islamism. The Voice of the Martyrs makes no attempt to link the persecution of Christians with the repression of other religious traditions, nor do its publications use the language or logics of “human rights.” In addition, the Voice of the Martyrs seems not to be particularly concerned with stopping religious persecution, since, like some other organizations, it figures the persecution of Christians as the defining feature of “Chris-
tianness. At least one journalistic report about the movement focuses on the tendency of some Voice of the Martyrs members to romanticize the experience of persecution by indulging in dangerous "undercover" missions into "enemy" territory.11 Meanwhile, the organization's rhetoric is mobile, adaptable, and attentive to changes in the political terrain: a recent Voice of the Martyrs publication promoted the idea that Christianity is the most potent weapon in the war on terror.

Akin to the Voice of the Martyrs in its origins and sensibilities is Open Doors, an organization that also has Cold War roots, tracing its origins to 1955, when "Brother Andrew, founder of Open Doors, made his first trip behind the Iron Curtain to take Bibles to persecuted Christians," according to the group's Web site.12 Like the Voice of the Martyrs' use of experiential rhetoric to build up solidarity among First World Christians and their suffering coreligionists, Open Doors — especially its youth branch, called Underground — also encourages an experiential relationship to the "persecuted church," especially for young First World Christians. Open Doors' youth ministry produces curricula that encourage church youth groups to stage a "night of persecution" or "lockdown," during which group members enact the kidnapping and torture of Christian "tribes" and the subsequent perseverance of the persecuted Christian tribespeople.13

Meanwhile, like the Voice of the Martyrs, Open Doors organizes its activism exclusively around Christian sources and objects. In particular, the Bible is simultaneously the source of the group's mandate and the material object of its activity. The "Vision Statement" of Open Doors makes a series of associations — between persecution and mission, between suffering and church growth — that are all grounded in citations from the Bible:

Our purpose [is] to strengthen and equip the Body of Christ living under or facing restriction and persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ, and to encourage their involvement in world evangelism by providing Bibles and literature, media, leadership training, socio-economic development and through intercessory prayer; preparing the Body of Christ living in threatened or unstable areas to face persecution and suffering; and educating and mobilizing the Body of Christ living in the free world to identify with threatened and persecuted Christians and be actively involved in assisting them. We do so because we believe when one member suffers, all members suffer with it (1 Corinthians 12:26), all doors are open and God enables His Body to go into all the world and preach the Gospel.14

The group's three arenas of activity — Bible distribution and missionizing, activism among Christians to prepare for persecution, and outreach within "the free world" (likely holdover terminology from the Cold War) — are grounded, as the vision statement makes clear, in the generative figure of "the Body of Christ" (a biblical metaphor with a complex historical, theological, liturgical, and cultural legacy) and in the Bible itself as a materially mediating force in geopolitics. Targeting various regions around the globe — "the Far East" (by which they mean China), "the Muslim world," the former Soviet Union, Latin America, and Africa (where Islam is said to be
“encroaching”)—Open Doors is explicitly centered on Christianity and Christians and does not concern itself more broadly with efforts to ensure “religious freedom” as a human-rights issue. The organization explains under the heading “How We Set Limits”: “The determining factor for Open Doors involvement anywhere in the world is the presence of a Persecuted Church. We stand alongside when the Body of Christ has run into problems because of its own identity.”

The organizing principles of Open Doors, like those of the Voice of the Martyrs, emphasize biblical mandates, not international human-rights protocols. Both groups focus not on ecumenical efforts toward the promotion of human rights and religious freedom, but on stressing the creative and mutually reinforcing links between suffering and conversion. Persecution and missionary activity are unapologetically implicated in each other in the work of the Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors. Their version of internationalism is predicated not on the formal political bodies that generate international coalitions devoted to shared values of human solidarity, as one might characterize many human-rights entities, but rather on a biblically grounded internationalism aimed toward Christian universalism. This internationalism has recently come into view in the organizing efforts of the youth branch of Open Doors, which encourages young people to wear clothing and accessories that testify to their “citizenship” in the Underground.

While organizations such as the Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors (and its subsidiaries) use the Bible as the source for their activism and focus their attention exclusively on the experiences of Christians globally, other Christian NGOs seek to build different kinds of international alliances, ones that place the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, especially Article 18, at the center of their organizing and activism, usually either downplaying their biblical or creedal mandates or placing Christian theological prooftexts alongside the UDHR. For example, the National Association of Evangelicals, which led the campaign to get Congress to pass the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, produced just such an imbricated vision of Bible-based Christianity and human-rights language in its promotion of that piece of legislation. In this framing of activist projects, a Christian imperative to promote religious freedom grows out of the mixed grounds of Christian universalism and international human-rights protocols.

A telling example in this regard is the organization Forum 18, which is based in Oslo, Norway. It describes its aims in this language: “Forum 18 is an instrument for promoting the implementation of Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and concentrates on serious and obvious breaches of religious freedom, and particularly on situations where the lives and welfare of individual people or groups are being threatened and where the right to gather around one’s faith is being hindered.” Its media outreach initiative, Forum 18 News Service, understands its mandate in clearly Christian terms, as an enactment of a Christian commitment to human solidarity:

Forum 18 News Service (F18News) is a Christian initiative which is independent of any one church or religious group. Its independence is safeguarded by a board whose members
are Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic Christians, and who are responsible for matters of policy and fundraising. Fri8News is committed to Jesus Christ's command to do to others what you would have them do to you, and so reports on threats and actions against the religious freedom of all people, regardless of their religious affiliation.  

The commitment to covering threats to religious freedom across traditions is displayed in the organization's "Latest News" catalog of cases, where Muslims and Christians both appear as objects of repression or violence in an almost equal number of stories. Moreover, a search of the news service's archives generates accounts of global conflicts over religious practices, affiliations, and identities that are by no means focused only on Christians.

If Forum 18 represents what seems to be a deeply ecumenical activism based on a subtle blend of human-rights discourses and Christian commitments — and an activism that is predicated on a studied form of objectivity — other organizations that strive to combine the imperatives of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights with the demands of Christian conviction seem to struggle more with the tensions between these two registers of ethical obligation. Christian Solidarity International (CSI) is exemplary in this regard; it joins American evangelicals in claiming that the human rights articulated by the UDHR are a divine gift: "CSI's primary objective is worldwide respect for the God-given right of every human being to choose his or her faith and to practice it, as stipulated in Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." This general commitment to religious freedom, however, narrows in CSI's framing of its project as one that is devoted to Christian solidarity with persecuted Christians. As CSI's analysis unfolds in its literature and publications, it becomes clear that it shares the opinion of groups such as the Voice of the Martyrs and Open Doors that Islam and Communism are the main "causes" of Christian persecution. CSI also includes "authoritarian regimes" and "war" within its taxonomy of such causes. Strikingly, the CSI Web site conflates one of the categories it identifies as a cause of Christian persecution, "Militant Manifestations of Religion," with Islam as a whole. Although the site goes on to concede that "militancy" is not solely attributable to Islam — "The world is experiencing not only the rise of radical Islamic fundamentalists, but also a surge of violent tendencies in other religions and sects" — Islam serves as the exemplar for "religious militancy" tout court.

CSI organizes itself around a Christian mandate to help other Christians, and it draws upon an eclectic array of scriptural, theological, and human-rights prooftexts to articulate its vision of religious liberty. Genesis 1:26-27, the creation of humanity in the image of God, becomes the foundation for CSI's argument that human rights are divinely created and commanded. CSI's theological framing here links Gregory of Nyssa, whose On Perfection argues that human freedom has its foundations in the human likeness to God; the twentieth-century Protestant theologian Karl Barth's view that human rights came into being out of God's love; and the Second Vatican Council's assertion that religious freedom is rooted in divine revelation. In short, the Bible and its traditional
Where Christians are Persecuted

Map Key

DEFINITION
Religious Liberty
The right to worship and practise the religion of your choice in private and in community including the right to witness and evangelise and the right to convert, i.e., to change your religion.

Under Sharia (Islamic) Law, the severity of persecution depends on the degree to which Sharia is implemented, which varies widely.
Sharia increases Islamic zeal and codifies inequality and religious repression.

These classifications consider primarily the religious liberty situation for nationals and not necessarily the situation for ex-patriates.

Key

T Totalitarian, repressive state (Communist, C)
H Hindu State (state religion is Hinduism; no Religious Liberty)
I Islamic State (state religion is Islam; no RL)
S State religion is Islam but official RL
S Sharia (Islamic) Law enacted, or used as a source of legislation, or as a standard
N Religious nationalism (Buddhist, Hindu, Catholic (C); Orthodox (O))
M Increasingly radicalised and intolerant Muslim majority

Our Lord and Deliverer
reception by Orthodox, Protestant, and Catholic interpreters produce a unified vision of the theological basis of human rights. Indeed, as CSI’s framing of the matter would have it, religious freedom is rooted in natural law “and as such is both anterior and superior to state law. The state is thus under a duty to recognize the right and create conditions favorable to its exercise.” According to this point of view, documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights simply articulate, as a second-order correlate, states’ obligation to enforce the affirmation of religious freedom’s fundamental character, one “both anterior and superior to” anything that a national or international system of law might assert or codify.

It is impossible to consider Christian activism against religious persecution and for religious freedom expressed in the idiom of human rights without noticing how it is interwoven with the idealistic foreign policy of the Bush administration, dominated by neconservative principles and commitments. This idealist, moralizing, evangelizing, coercive use of force in the service of spreading “democracy” and “freedom” tends to be utopian, unmoored from any knowledge of historical specificities and contingencies, and immune to critique. Just so, one sees important parallels between the uninterrogated and self-evident belief that all people want American-style democracy and the expression of the view that “religious freedom” is the sine qua non of democracy, even as only certain religious ideas and practices qualify for protection under the banner of religious freedom. In the process, “religion” itself must be defined and framed, and categories of “good religion” and “bad religion” must be produced and applied to specific examples.

The efforts of the Center for Religious Freedom, a New York City–based project of Freedom House, are exemplary of this paradoxical interweaving of advocacy for religious freedom as a human-rights absolute within U.S. foreign policy with efforts to confine and contain certain religious practices (especially the imposition of Islamic law in certain countries) with the promotion of the U.S.’s geopolitical interests. The opening paragraph of the center’s self-description on its Web site makes these commitments explicit:

The Center for Religious Freedom is a self-sustaining division of Freedom House. Founded in 1941 by Eleanor Roosevelt and Wendell Willkie to oppose Nazism and Communism in Europe, Freedom House is America’s oldest human rights group. Its Center for Religious freedom defends against religious persecution of all groups throughout the world. It insists that U.S. foreign policy defend Christians and Jews, Muslim dissidents and minorities, and other religious minorities in countries such as Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria, Iran and Sudan. It is fighting the imposition of harsh Islamic law in the new Iraq and Afghanistan and opposes blasphemy laws in Muslim countries that suppress more tolerant and pro-American Muslim thought.
Statements such as these call attention to the selective convictions of some advocates for religious freedom, who promote an abstract ideal of religious freedom as an inalienable human right at the same time as they place some elements of religion—in this example, “harsh Islamic law” and blasphemy laws—outside the protections accorded under the banner of religious freedom. Under this logic, “tolerant and pro-American Muslim thought” (good religion) should enjoy shelter under international protocols and U.S. foreign policy, whereas “harsh Islamic law” (bad religion) should not. My point is not to defend Islamic law, harsh or otherwise, but to observe that it functions here as a singular and exemplary limit within the rhetorics and logics of some advocates for religious freedom.

Calling religious freedom “the most neglected human right in U.S. foreign policy,” the Freedom House narrative explicitly links advocacy for religious freedom as a human right to the war on terror:

Religious freedom faces hard new challenges Recent decades have seen the rise of extreme interpretations of Islamic rule that are vitally intolerant of other traditions within Islam, as well as of non-Muslims. Many in our policy world still find religious freedom too “sensitive” to raise. But since 9/11, the link between our own security and freedom, between our national interests and our ideals, has never been clearer. Winning the War on Terror turns on the battles of ideas and at its heart is the principle of religious freedom.

In this portrait of the current situation, the security, freedom, national interests, and ideals of the United States are collectively arrayed on one side of the battlefield in the “War on Terror”; on the other side are the “extreme interpretations of Islamic rule.” Religious freedom, framed as “the most neglected human right,” becomes the fragile, but crucial fulcrum on which the outcome of the war without end hinges. If victory in the war on terror requires victory on the battlefield of ideas, then religious freedom becomes a kind of gospel, spread by geopolitically savvy missionaries in the service of U.S. values and goals. At the same time, this program imagines religious freedom as an exclusive privilege of those forms of religion deemed legitimate, moderate, tolerant, tolerable, and consistent with American security and national interests.

In The Impossibility of Religious Freedom, the lawyer and anthropologist of religion Winnifred Fallers Sullivan demonstrates how such theoretical and practical impasses are inevitable. One of the foundational ironies of legal protections for religious freedom, she notes, is that such legal protections require that governments or international bodies to define the very object of protection—religion. Ironically, in their efforts to oppose limitations on “religion,” national governments and international governing bodies in fact find themselves delimiting what counts as religion. Given that religion as a category is always produced ideologically—as the other of reason, according to one reading, or as the privileged resource for ethics, according to another—defining religion, Sullivan argues, depends upon a deep-seated ambivalence toward the object of
definition itself. The impossibility of religious freedom emerges from this ambivalence, as she puts it quite elegantly toward the end of her argument:

Legally enforced religious freedom as a political goal denies and conceals the profound ambivalence toward religion revealed in this split personality [religion as irrational/savage/other versus religion as the primary source of ethical thought and behavior]. Furthermore, the denial is arguably accomplished, in part, through the use of the Delphic utopian language of human rights, whether in national constitutions or in international instruments. The denial may certainly be necessary to the political consensus underlying the promotion and protection of religious freedom. But the denial also conceals the fact that religion is not always, in fact, absolutely free, legally speaking. The right kind of religion, the approved religion, is always that which is protected, while the wrong kind, whether popular or unpopular, is always restricted or even prohibited.  

Sullivan's characterization of human-rights language as "Delphic" and "utopian" emphasizes the performative, prophetic, and idealizing functions of such language in the field of religious freedom. It glosses the rhetorical impact of repeated insistences that "religious freedom" is a God-given human right, insistences that render the contents of the category and the effects of its imposition closed to discussion or critique, threaded through by an unsettling impulse toward absolutism. When human rights and religious freedom come to occupy the full terrain of the thinkable vis-à-vis "freedom," nonreligious subjectivities—groups of people who organize themselves under other kinds of identities and claim rights that are contrary to some religious teachings (women and sexual minorities, most notably)—find themselves in the impossible position of seeking to make their claims on religious grounds or having no ground from which to speak.

The turn toward a theologized version of human rights needs to be historicized in several different ways. In the United States at least, it is intelligible only in relation to very specific histories and cultural realities—in particular, the rise of the religious right since the 1980s, with its grounding in a particular narrative about American history and American values (always interwoven with biblical themes and citations, invocations of God's promise, and so on), and its increasingly militant attitude with respect to both domestic politics and international affairs. It was, at one time, possible to imagine an American international human-rights project that was not explicitly theologically inflected—and, indeed, there are many U.S.-based human-rights NGOs that derive their rationales from humanistic values and self-described secular notions of human solidarity and justice.

And yet it is not the case that a realm of "the purely secular" ever actually existed, nor do I mean to advocate for it. As recent analyses of secularism have shown, the secular in U.S. contexts has often underwritten a civil religion that is broadly Protestant in its assumptions and imaginations. As the anthropologist of secularism Talal
Asad has observed, the “human” in “human rights,” as it is deployed in contemporary U.S. argument, is thoroughly interwoven with Christian and—in particular—Protestant ideas about private and public and confusion over “Religion” as a general category and “religion” as a uniquely Protestant conceptuality. The move on the part of religiously grounded movements to lay claim to the “human rights” banner is also tied, in the United States, to other appropriations of strategies, arguments, and political themes—especially drawing on identity politics and civil rights. In other words, human rights, identity politics (often grounded in narratives of victimization, injury, and suffering), and civil rights have all become highly mobile discourses in U.S. political life. Whereas they were once the privileged idioms of the progressive left, they have increasingly become the adopted languages of the religious right. To understand the theologization of human rights, it is necessary to trace the process by which this discursive change has taken place.

A final point: it is critically important to understand how the rhetoric of human rights in relation to religious freedom works in some quarters as a highly effective tool for silencing political debate and dissent. To raise questions about the effects of this rhetoric is to open oneself to the damning response “Oh, so you are for religious persecution?” When “human rights” is theologized, grounded in an idealized category called “religion,” the unhappy result may be the evacuation of the political terrain. Grounding human rights in theological precepts, religious claims, conceptions of God, and biblical authority effectively renders any claims that proceed from that ground by definition unassailable and immune to critique, interrogation, or dissent. Since, as Asad has famously observed, the “human” in “human rights” is an autonomous Christian subject (produced through Protestant theorizing about both “humanness” and “religion”) whose “rights” come to be guaranteed through the threat or practice of violence by the state, and the human-rights project thereby emerges as an evangelizing tool, one wonders what space remains in the conversation for those whose religion does not enshrine conservative or traditional values, those whose religion does not fit the reigning framework, or those who are simply nonreligious.

Moreover, the rhetorical move reinscribes a flatfooted and unhelpful dualism—religion versus secularism—that makes nuanced conversation about how to constitute and sustain social and political arrangements nearly impossible. Any discussion of these pressing matters, it seems to me, must avoid any simple reduction to a facile binary—“religion” versus “secularism.” And yet there are many incommensurabilities, competing sets of claims to rights and recognitions, and complex (and also concrete) effects produced by the movements outlined here. Moreover, the double-edged character of the “universal,” as it asserts itself in all of these discourses—whether in UN ethical declarations or in Christian activist formulations—needs to remain both fully in view and under continued interrogation.
1 See, however, Micheline R Ishay, The History of Human Rights: From Ancient Times to the Globalization Era (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), which seeks to re
introduce the voices of socialists and feminists into the history of human rights theorizing.


4 Whether human-rights discourses are “religious” or “secular” in origin remains a question openly and passionately debated among human-rights historians and theorists. Ishay’s History of Human Rights offers an excellent overview of the issues at stake in this debate. For a sympathetic defense of the view that human rights are historically grounded in theological or religious claims, see, for example, Michael Freeman, ‘The Problem of Secularism in Human Rights Theory,’ Human Rights Quarterly 26 (2004), pp. 375–400. For a sympathetic overview of the alliances involved in U S activism, see Allen D Hertzke, Freeing God’s Children: The Unlikely Alliance for Global Human Rights (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002).


9 See Janet R Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, “What’s Wrong with Tolerance?” in Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), pp. 45–73, for a provocative critique of the imaginative and practical impasses embedded in the efforts to set “religious freedom” and “sexual freedom” in opposition.

10 The Voice of the Martyrs, “About VOM,” www.persecution.com/about/index.cfm?action=vom


16 On the Underground Web site, one can order “the official Citizen Kit”: The kit, which costs $25, includes an olive-street ‘Citizen’ T-shirt, an Underground beanie, an Underground sweatband, a poster of Eritrea (the focus of the current Underground project), and a copy of a book recounting Brother Andrew’s ministry “that will challenge your spiritual growth” (http://odusa.org/Store/ResourcesStep2.asp?Group=154)

17 See Castelli, “Praying for the Persecuted Church,” for an analysis of the NAE’s statement.


21 See Forum 18, “Forum 18 News Service’s Mission Statement,” which claims that “Forum 18 News is objective: presenting news in a deliberately calm and balanced fashion, and presenting all sides of a situation. The overriding editorial objective of Forum 18 News is to as accurately as possible present the truth of a situation, both implicitly and explicitly. Forum 18 News aims to ensure that threats and actions against religious freedom are truthfully reported as quickly as possible across the world.” The concern for “objectivity” and “truth,” expressed in emphatic and repetitious language, suggests that the authors of the statement are seeking to distinguish themselves from practices that fall outside the purview of these privileged categories.


25 Freedom House’s right-wing political slant has been the object of study and critique by progressive watchdog groups and policy analysts. See, most recently, International Relations Center, “Freedom House,” Right Web Profile, IRC Right Web (Silver City, NM: International Relations Center, 2005), http://rightweb.irc-online.org/profile/1476
26 Freedom House, “About the Center for Religious Freedom,” www.freedomhouse.org/religion/about/about.htm

27 Ibid
29 Ibid., p. 154
33 A guide to first steps toward thinking beyond such dualisms can be found in William E. Connolly, Why I Am Not a Secularist (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999)
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