That which is noteworthy and that which is astonishing in The Global Charter of Conscience

Thomas K Johnson[1]

The manner in which the new *Global Charter of Conscience* was presented portrayed the power of a renewed paradigm for the ethics of public life.[2] Viewed globally, it was remarkable that representatives of the United Nations, the European Union, and the European Evangelical Alliance not only sat together peacefully at one table, but also spoke with a completely unified voice on matters of religion and conscience (June 21, 2012, at the European Parliament in Brussels). They describe the Charter, with the subtitle "A Global Covenant Concerning Faiths and Freedom of Conscience," as a supplement and support for Article 18 of the UN *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948). The new text is no doubt one of the most profound short explanations of freedom of religion and belief in human history; it also clarifies the way in which freedom of conscience is indivisible from all fundamental human rights. This is truly *noteworthy.* What is *astonishing* is that this document was presented by a distinctly Christian organization which is much concerned with missions and church planting, along with representatives of two of the world's most prominent secular organizations, namely the United Nations and the European Union. What is the renewed paradigm behind this event?

The primary author of the new Charter is Dr. Os Guinness, who developed the text in cooperation with "a group of followers of many faiths and of none, politicians of many persuasions, academics, and NGOs who are committed to a partnership on behalf of 'freedom of thought, conscience, and religion' for people of all faiths and of none." At the launch of the document in Brussels, Guinness said that 50 or 60 people consulted with him. Of course, Guinness is well known as a gifted Christian apologist, and there are probably many people who are practicing Christians today because of his lectures and books. Perhaps some of those who consulted on the text who were "followers of many faiths and of none" are now considering the claims of Christianity. But in this text Guinness was primarily working in his role as social theorist, not in his role of apologist, and the fact that we can make this distinction in roles points to the crucial matter of the paradigm used in this document.

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[2] www.charterofconscience.org.

In his short speech at the European Parliament, Guinness noted that around the world (and probably throughout history) there have been two predominant models of the relation of religion to the "Public Square." In the model of the "Sacred Public Square," a particular religion is used to provide legitimacy and meaning for government and other public institutions; different religions have played this role in different societies. In the model of the "Naked Public Square," often a reaction to the previous model, no traditional religion is allowed to play such a role in society; but some variety of secularism is usually smuggled in, in a manner that seems to make secularism a substitute religion. (Think of Communism, National Socialism, and many varieties of nationalism.) In this text and in his speech, Guinness appealed for the global recognition of a third alternative, a "Civil Public Square," which recognizes the role of religions and systems of belief in human life, but does not seek legitimacy for government or the broader public square under the umbrella of a particular religion or secular religion substitute. Society must be marked by true freedom of thought, conscience, and religion and honestly recognize that "the decisive differences between the world's ultimate beliefs are ultimate and irreducible – and these differences are crucial for both individuals and for societies and civilizations." But in contrast to either a Sacred Public Square or a Naked Public Square, in societies with a Civil Public Square, unity is based on "articles of peace rather than articles of faith . . . through a framework of common rights, responsibilities, and respect" (Article 18). The basis for such a Civil Public Square is "the inviolable dignity of each human individual, in particular in the character of reason and conscience" (Article 2).

In advocating this new social paradigm, Guinness is not only pragmatically using his role as a prominent western intellectual to try to reduce the pressure on millions of Christians who are persecuted or face discrimination because of their faith, though that would be worthwhile in itself. Guinness embodies and has articulated a much older paradigm of Christian social ethics, found in both classical Protestant (Martin Luther and John Calvin) and Roman Catholic (Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus) sources, and which I believe is rooted in the Bible. Though they were not able to apply their insights because they lived in an era when Europe predominantly used a model of a "Sacred Public Square," which has also been called the "Constantinian Era," both classical Protestant and Catholic thought distinguished between the realm of relating to God by faith in Christ and the realm of relating to each other in society on the basis of the moral law. And they thought that a significant knowledge of the moral law was given by God to all people, regardless of their faith, through God-given general revelation or "the light of nature;" and this moral knowledge (not our relationship to God by faith in Christ) was to provide the basis for life together in society.[3]

[3] For more on this topic within classical Protestant sources see Thomas K. Johnson, "Law and Gospel:

What is truly astonishing is the way this old and very classical paradigm, articulated in the Christian "Middle Ages," has been renewed and applied for solving one of the dominant problems facing the twenty-first century. The new *Charter* recognizes the massive role that ultimate religious or secular beliefs play in human life, but at the same time it recognizes that we are aware of very significant social/moral norms (such as rights, duties, and responsibilities) regardless of our ultimate beliefs. These secondary or penultimate social/moral norms, related to recognizing the human dignity of our neighbors, should provide a basis for civility and peace in society.

Many of the readers of *IJRF,* like me, probably openly identify themselves as Christians, meaning we relate to God on the basis of faith in Christ. But we must distinguish this ultimate faith from the penultimate level of morally ordered and peaceful life in society. And while we invite our neighbors to faith in Christ, we must also encourage the adherents of other religions and belief systems to make this distinction between ultimate faith and penultimate social ethics which we Christians have been making for many centuries. This would be a proper use of the astonishing element in the new *Charter.* The alternative is really the continuation of the problem which the editors of the *Charter* described, citing a report of the Pew Forum: "three quarters of the world's population live in countries [with] . . . a high degree of menace to their faith – sometimes through government repression, sometimes through sectarian violence, and sometimes through the mounting culture wars that we are now seeing in Western countries."[4]

The hermeneutical/homiletical key to Reformation theology and ethics," *Evangelical Review of Theology,* vol. 36, no 2, April 2012.

[4] Both this quotation and a previous quotation are from the cover of the printed version of the Charter, which may be read and downloaded online.

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