

Global Charter of Conscience

Brief summary of principles

Editorial note

The Global Charter of Conscience is a declaration reaffirming and supporting Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It sets out a vision of “freedom of thought, conscience and religion” for people of all faiths and none, and calls for the cultivation of civility and the construction of a civil public square that maximizes freedom for everyone. The Charter has been drafted and published by a group of followers of many faiths and 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 none. The Charter was launched publicly at the European Parliament on 21 June 2012, at the Global Media Forum in Bonn on 27 June and at a prestigious lecture in London on 28 June. The text documented below is a brief summary. The full text of the Charter, additional responses to frequently asked questions, endorsements, and news can be found on a dedicated website: www.charterofconscience.org.

Reaffirming and supporting Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship, and observance.”

Article 18, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Keenly aware of the titanic promise and peril of our time, as forms of global interconnectedness reach an unprecedented speed, scale, and scope across the earth, we issue this declaration to address a major world challenge whose resolution will be decisive for the cause of civilization and human flourishing. That is, we address the urgent problems raised by the challenge of “living with our deepest differences” when those differences involve core beliefs, worldviews, and ways of life, and when they are increasingly found within single communities, nations, and civilizations. Our purpose is to set out a vision of the rights, responsibilities, and respect that will be the foundation of a civil and cosmopolitan “global public square,” and the habits of the heart for those who would be “citizens of the world” as well as patriots in their own countries, and so to advance the cause of a “good world” and thus of global civilization over against the forces of global chaos.

1. Freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is a precious, fundamental, and inalienable human right – the right to adopt, hold, freely exercise, share, or change one’s beliefs, subject solely to the dictates of conscience and independent of all outside, especially governmental control.
2. This right is inherent in humanity and rooted in the inviolable dignity of each human individual. As a birthright of belonging, it protects our freedom to be human and is the equal right of all human beings without exception.
3. The right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion contains a duty as well as a right, because a right for one person is automatically a right for another and a responsibility for both.
4. The public place of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion is best fulfilled through cultivating civility between citizens and constructing a cosmopolitan and civil public square – a public square in which people of all faiths, religious and naturalistic, are free to enter and engage public life on the basis of their faith.
5. The rights of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion apply not only to individuals, but to individuals in community with others, associating on the basis of faith.
6. The rights of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as well as the realities of modern diversity, pose a particular challenge to the traditional standing of established, or monopoly worldviews. Both religious believers and secularists must acknowledge the excesses and at times evils of their respective positions, and commit themselves to an equal regard for the rights of all who differ from them in their ultimate beliefs.
7. We acknowledge that this Charter is neither perfect, nor final, nor agreed by all. It represents our best current judgment as to the place of the rights of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion in our world. But it is always open to future generations to improve and advance these affirmations, aiming always to build societies that are yet freer and more just.
8. Our goals for this Charter are three: First, that it will be a beacon expressing the highest human aspirations for freedom of thought, conscience, and religion. Second, that it will be a benchmark enabling the most rigorous assessments of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, which communities, countries, and civilizations have achieved so far. Third, that it will be a blueprint empowering the most practical implementation of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, in both law and civic education.

In sum, The Global Charter of Conscience is a response to the crucial and unavoidable challenge of living with our deepest differences. Only by the wise and courageous application of these affirmations can humanity turn the danger of the

differences between ultimate beliefs into a dignity of difference that will help make the world safer for diversity.

“The General Assembly Proclaims this Universal Declaration of Human Rights as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among peoples of the member states themselves.” *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Paris, December 1948.*

“So, let us not be blind to our differences – but let us also direct our attention to our common interests and to means by which those differences can be resolved. And if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For, in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s future. And we are all mortal.” *President John F. Kennedy, Commencement Address at American University, June, 1963.*

