

Common Good, God, and Human Rights – A Reflection on *We Choose Abundant Life*

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Abstract

*This article addresses watchwords that are dealt with in *We Choose Abundant Life* in relation to human rights. Specifically addressed are: the right to life and abundant life, the minority concept, vulnerable groups, freedom of conscience in relation to freedom of religion or belief and the idea of a crown among freedoms. The question is raised about in what way human rights may be a useful tool for theology and religious communities. The concept of “common good” is used to discuss how theology with the expression kingdom of God and a society based on democracy, equal citizenship and human rights are speaking the same language. One conclusion is that the document, through its working method, analysis, conclusions and recommendations, has to develop choices and policies for a common good based on theology in combination with human rights and democracy.*

Keywords

The Right of Life and Abundant Life, Freedom of Conscience, Freedom of Religion or Belief, Common Good, Minority Rights, Kingdom of God

Introduction

Based in Western Europe, over the years I have actively tried to follow the development of Christian communities in the Middle East through books, articles and visits. Now, reading *We Choose Abundant Life* (WCAL) with the purpose “Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices,” I have found a very significant document.¹ It offers deep in-

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¹ *We Choose Abundant Life*, <https://wechooseabundantlife.com/>, accessed June 10, 2024. Other documents of huge importance are *Kairos Document: A moment of truth. A word of faith, hope and love from the heart of Palestinian suffering*, published in Bethlehem in 2009, <https://kairospalestine.ps/index.php/about-kairos/kairos-palestine-document>, accessed June 10, 2024, and *Listening to the East: Synodality in Eastern and Oriental Orthodox Church Tradition*, https://www.pro-orientale.at/media/test/23_1404-VFR-COLLANA-UT-UNUM-SINT-LISTENING-TO-THE-EAST.pdf, accessed March 26, 2025. For an overview of Christianity in the Middle East, see Deanna Ferree

sight into the current conditions of Christian communities in the Middle East.² The term contextual theology is used with taking “reality as its starting-point” (para. 3). The document refers frequently to “public sphere” and “public affairs” and could also be labelled as doing public theology.³ It deals, for example, with choices and policies for societies balancing between traditional and modern values, like diversity, sectarian and religious extremism, church hierarchies and with the struggle for citizenship and equality in the states.

Theologians as well as denominations internationally, have more or less accepted the language and ideas of international human rights. But how to motivate as well as to deal with these rights may differ. My reading of *We Choose Abundant Life* takes as a point of departure the concept of human rights but also the relationship between theology and human rights. This dual focus has characterized my professional work as educator and researcher.⁴

A Word on Human Rights

Human rights are basically international agreements including a set of rights concerning each and every individual. The intention is primarily to defend each individual's rights and freedoms and to secure protection against any violation of the rights. A basic document is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948. In *We Choose Abundant Life*, the declaration is referred to as a solid moral system (para. 18). In relation to the emancipation of women as second-class beings in the churches of the Middle East, the reference is made simultaneously to the Universal Declaration and the Bible (Gal. 3.28) (para. 69).

In addition, *We Choose Abundant Life* refers to human rights violations as well as the importance of respect for human rights. Therefore, it is important to mention that in addition to the Universal Declaration,

Womack, *Christian Communities in the Contemporary Middle East: An Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 2020). For Palestine specifically, see Mitri Raheb, *Decolonizing Palestine: The Land, The People, The Bible* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2023).

² The authors of the document describe themselves: “We are women and men, ordained ministers and lay people. We belong to different Churches and have different cultural horizons, national geographies, and complementary areas of expertise.” *WCAL*, para. 2.

³ Martin Accad has categorized the text as “a renewed framework for public theology.” Martin Accad, “Christians in the Middle East: Towards Renewed Theological, Social, and Political Choices,” *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 43, no. 1 (2022): 50–64.

⁴ Being on part-time, at the moment, at the University College Stockholm, Sweden, with education in human rights including master level and in theology including PhD-level.

there is an international United Nations (UN) human rights system and the scope of the human rights system extends far beyond being a moral challenge by providing a legal basis for the relationship between the state and the individual. This is codified in legal documents in the form of international declarations, conventions and legal practice. It is worth recalling some of the basic conventions of the corpus of international human rights law for the protection of human dignity:⁵

- International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
- International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
- Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment
- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination
- Convention on the Rights of the Child
- Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

States that have ratified conventions and thus become parties to international treaties assume obligations and duties under international law to respect, protect and fulfil human rights.⁶ But also, civil society, as religious communities, may play a role in, for example, exposing oppression and violations of human rights as well as ensuring that a religious community or denomination internally complies with the human rights standard. *We Choose Abundant Life* inserts human rights as a cornerstone for a functioning society and for a church with a future.

A vision for the Middle Eastern society

In this part I will relate what I perceive as an overall vision in *We Choose Abundant Life*. Then, in the following parts, I will discuss issues of particular importance.

Against the background of prevailing conditions in Middle Eastern society, a vision based on citizenship and equality is painted with the help of watchwords. Among the key words, justice, freedom, and equality are highlighted in particular (para. 74). In other parts of the document,

⁵ The texts of various conventions as well as additional protocols can be read in their entirety at the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-listings>, accessed June 10, 2024.

⁶ For more information, see for example “What are human rights?” <https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights>, accessed June 10, 2024.

democracy replaces the word equality and justice is qualified as social justice (para. 9 and 62). But there are also more general expressions such as human dignity and freedom (para. 71) or human dignity and personal freedom (para. 76). And when discussing the enlightenment of Arabism, human rights and economic integrity is added (para. 62). To give a summary to this list, here is a quote pinpointing the role of Christians:

The prophetic role of the Christians of the Middle East requires us **to be biased towards the causes of freedom, justice, human rights, the right to self-determination, democracy and the regular peaceful transfer of power in all the countries of the region.** (para. 97)⁷

These powerful words, each filled with life-changing content, are chosen with great thought and with hope for the future. Basically, they are strongly reminiscent of how the UN Charter from 1948 begins in the Preamble with determination:

[...] to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.⁸

So, even if the words human rights are mentioned on some occasions in *We Choose Abundant Life*, the aim of human rights, basically as personal freedoms and rights, seems to be in focus with end goals such as democracy, citizenship and common good. And there is no contradiction with the prophetic role of the Christians of the Middle East. The overall starting point already in the introduction begins with a quotation from the Bible: “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live [...]” (Deut. 30.19b). It is about choosing perspective and adopting a right-based approach for the benefit of the people in establishing a democratic society based on equal citizenship and human rights.

The right to life and abundant life

When reading *We Choose Abundant Life*, a number of questions related to the human rights agenda emerge. The intention is now to address

⁷ Bold is used in the original text.

⁸ “United Nations Charter. Preamble,” un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/preamble, accessed June 10, 2024.

some of these in the following sections, starting with the right to life and abundant life. This is followed by questions about freedom of conscience in relation to freedom of religion or belief, minority rights and vulnerable groups.

Professor George Sabra⁹ has opened up a conversation about an ambivalence between “life” and “abundant life” based on two of the Bible quotations used in *We Choose Abundant Life*, Jn 10.10¹⁰ and Deut. 30.19b¹¹. The tension becomes obvious. It is about the sense of life as the human being chooses (or chooses death) affecting future generations and life that is given or granted (eternal) and therefore abundant. On one hand, the significance of personal responsibility and the consequences of our actions in making choices that align with God’s will that lead to life and blessings rather than death and curses. On the other hand, a message about the purpose of Jesus’ coming as a gift and the source of true life.

Sabra remarks that “choosing life” in the document’s last paragraph refers to a commitment “to human solidarity and a dignified life” and “a rejection of the rampant culture of death and the adoption of the logic of violence to resolve conflicts.”¹²

At the writing of this article, the Eurovision song contest took place in Malmö, Sweden. In the city, big demonstrations were carried out against the participation of Israel in the contest while the war in Gaza raged. According to one of the Swedish evening papers, among slogans you could hear (in Swedish) was “Everyone in Gaza has the right to life” and “All children are equally valuable.” Here can also be perceived a distinction between different ways of using the concept of life that bring with them differentiated focus and implications. I will exemplify through the rights of the child.

You may find a moral right, the right to life, as a fundamental ethical principle. Every child and person (in Gaza) deserves to live, implying at the same time a call for the protection and preservation of life. This protection and preservation of life is applicable not least in any context that might be experiencing conflict or threats to safety. The second statement talks about the virtue of being a child, the inherent worth and equal value of all children, and that all children should be treated with equal

⁹ George Sabra, “Impressive and Unprecedented,” *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 43, no. 1 (2022): 65–72.

¹⁰ *I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly*, (NRSV).

¹¹ *Choose life, so that you and your descendants may live*, (NRSV).

¹² Sabra, “Impressive and Unprecedented,” 69.

importance and dignity as a value of a group (children) across different contexts in all areas affecting children's well-being.

In the human rights discourse you may find statements on the rights of the child, here exemplified by the Convention of the Rights of the Child. First, it is not about children but about the child which implies that it concerns each and every individual child as expressed in the convention: "every child has the inherent right to life."¹³ Life means the maximum extent possible of survival but life goes beyond mere survival. It is also a holistic approach with the development of the child in focus. The child's best interests should ultimately be decisive for the relationship with a child.¹⁴

I believe that such reasoning about children is transferable to every human being, based on "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Life is a given universal right and it's about creating necessary conditions for life in a society based on abundant life. So, it concerns "Life" and "Abundant life."

Freedom of conscience and the Human Rights domain

An important statement in *We Choose Abundant Life* establishes that "freedom of conscience, the crown of all freedoms, is a major challenge in the Middle East and an inalienable, sacred right" (para. 58). Here, we will first touch on the concept of "conscience" and later come to a reflection on "the crown."

The meaning of the term conscience may differ in different contexts but can be perceived as a person's inner voice, moral awareness or decision-making based on ethical considerations. It can be described as a moral compass guiding societies as well as individuals and in recognizing and upholding the dignity and rights of all human beings. Professor Wigorts Yngvesson states in a book on Freedom of conscience:

From an ethical and moral point of view, freedom to conscience is the right that calls on everyone to take individual responsibility. A responsibility that has its roots in what we identify as the deepest human in us. But, also a responsibility in awareness of the destructive in the human being and in our structures. The right to freedom of conscience is

¹³ "Convention of the Rights of the Child," art. 6, ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/, accessed April 23, 2025.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, art 9.

about the art of using reason and empathy to make room for freedom and limit violence and oppression.¹⁵

How can we understand freedom of conscience in relation to the human rights' expression "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion?"¹⁶ The Universal Declaration of Human Rights indicates that everyone is "endowed with reason and conscience" as well as that there is a conscience of mankind.¹⁷ Still, the UN documents usually keep together "thought, conscience and religion." When the authors of *We Choose Abundant Life* choose to use "conscience" there needs to be a reason. When looking from the outside on a document about the Christians in the Middle East, the choice of not using freedom of religion seems to relate to the context and the aim of doing contextual theology.

When looking into the use of the concept "religion" in *We Choose Abundant Life*, it seems possible to conclude that it is of decisive importance in the Middle East. Religion is the label of different belief-systems and inserts the individual into different official categories. Thus, religion is among fields creating diversity. Religion can be marked by coexistence related to the public sphere but also creates patterns of conflict and competition as well as domination one over the other and there is a risk of (mis)use of religion as a political instrument (para. 6, 9). Religion is a cornerstone of state-building and a source of legislation (for example para. 60), and an instrument for sectarian calculations denying the legitimacy of the other's religion (para. 37). Perhaps it can be summed up by the fact that both the state, the society, and the religion have been "politicizing religion and religionizing politics" (para. 94). The Arab Renaissance aimed at the separation of state and religion and the cessation of a state based on religion (para. 11). This situation has created barriers and division between people (para. 20), "religious indifference and lack of trust in religion" as well as in the institution of religion (para. 20, 54) and mistrust in religion as such (para. 19, 54). In situations where constitutions and citizenship are connected to an identity based on religion, the term religion itself will be difficult to use. Instead, in a social situation where freedom linked to religion is traditionally connected with the rights of

¹⁵ Susanne Wigorts Yngvesson, *Frihet till samvete* (Stockholm: Timbro, 2016), 8. Translated from Swedish by NN.

¹⁶ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," art. 18 [un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights](https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights), accessed April 23, 2025; "International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights," art. 18 [ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/](https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/), accessed April 23, 2025.

¹⁷ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," art. 1, Preamble.

the group or the rights of the religion, an alternative can be to use conscience and thereby indicate a clear marking that it is about the right of the individual. When the background is described in this way, it is far from obvious to resort to the international concept of freedom of religion. The Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief has pinpointed that the “freedom of religion or belief protects individuals, not religions [...]”.¹⁸ The risk with using the term religion would have been to diminish the individual’s freedom of religion or belief and that it would instead be perceived as freedom for the religion.

When the right is defined as freedom of conscience, it becomes a clear indication that it is an individual right, the right of every person, male and female. Clearly, it’s a broad context and it includes, according to the document, “to live freely according to our options and convictions” and “it is rooted in the dignity of the person, regardless of origin, religious affiliation, or political choice” (para. 58). A broader use of conscience can also be seen when using the right of conscience together with other human rights as declared with “personal freedom, including freedom of conscience, opinion and expression” (para. 76). But the concepts are close to each other and can of course be used overall. Nayla Tabbara reads the document as calling for “the implementation of freedom of religion or belief, and freedom of conscience.”¹⁹ She transforms the right of conscience in the document to coincide with international language usage.

But still, how to relate to the international agreed upon definitions? Freedom of religion or belief can be divided into two major parts in order to understand the scope and protection of freedom of religion or belief in international human rights law.²⁰ The internal dimension of freedom of religion or belief is by tradition named *forum internum* while the external

¹⁸ *Rapporteur’s Digest on Freedom of Religion or Belief: Excerpts of the Reports from 1986 to 2022 by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief Arranged by Topics of the Framework for Communications* (Geneva: Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights United Nations, 2023), 59.

¹⁹ Nayla Tabbara, “Let Us *All* Choose Abundant Life! A Muslim and Dialogical Perspective,” *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 43, no. 1 (2022): 102–17.

²⁰ For an extremely detailed review of Freedom of religion or belief, see Heiner Bielefeldt, Nazila Ghanea and Michael Wiener, *Freedom of Religion or Belief: An International Law Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford Scholarly Authorities on International Law, 2016). A series of illustrative films in order to help grasping what freedom of religion or belief includes is presented by FORB Learning platform. See forb-learning.org/films/films-on-forb/ accessed June 10, 2024. Also available in Arabic: forb-learning.org/ar/films-on-forb/, accessed June 10, 2024.

dimension is named *forum externum*.²¹ *Forum internum* encompasses the right to have or change one's beliefs, thoughts, and conscience, sometimes described as the private, inner sphere. States must not interfere since this is considered absolute and inviolable under international law. *Forum externum* includes the manifestation of one's religion or belief. In some parts, this is based on the individual's right to participate in a community through worship, using symbols, building places for worship, observing holidays and days of rest, teaching and so on. The examples are also extended to one dimension that is politically and religiously very sensitive in the Middle East: the right to pass on one's faith to others. It also needs to be pointed out that the external use is subject to certain limitations.

Sure, a text like *We Choose Abundant Life* can in no way be that detailed and is not primarily about human rights as such, but discusses choices and policies for society at large. Still, the use of a right-based language in the document raises the question of freedom of conscience. This said, the use of freedom of conscience seems to fit well into the context of the Middle East protecting freedom but without language creating turbulence in relation to states, societies and religious communities because of the use of the concept religion. And in the end, it is important to keep in mind both *forum externum* and *forum internum* regarding this specific human right.

The crown of all freedoms

Individuals belonging to religious communities living in coexistence with and in dialogue with other individuals, with other communities and with the state often face questions about equality and the right to manifest their belief. In my country, Sweden, in the 1860s and with a situation of religious monopoly, it was a struggle for democracy and the right of conscience or belief. It was often expressed as the right to "my belief." But it was not in isolation. One quote exemplifies this: "Leave all research free, all conviction free, all speech free, all worship free. [...] A constitution which makes the state religious, makes me irreligious myself, provided I give this constitution my consent."²² Freedom of religion became considered as a "crown of freedoms" and a battering ram in a society opening up for diversity, freedom, equality and democracy. Introducing human rights conventions one hundred years later specified the various rights and freedoms.

²¹ Bielefeldt, Ghanea and Wiener, *Freedom*, 23.

²² Johannes Baptista, *Fyra bref om Religionsfrihet* (Stockholm: P. Palmqvists Förlag, 1868), 75.

It seems to be fair to conclude that the expression “the crown of all freedoms” in *We Choose Abundant Life* should not be considered to be a priority over other rights but just looked upon as a battering ram. This can be perceived when discussing the framework of contextual theology and an approach to “uphold human dignity and personal freedom, including freedom of conscience, opinion and expression” (para 76). It’s not always easy to keep all different human rights in mind and to implement them in a society. But it is, according to the human rights agenda, important to keep them together. This is clearly established by the UN when answering the question: “What are Human Rights?” Key words for the understanding of the function of human rights become that they are universal, inalienable, indivisible and interdependent.²³

Freedom of religion or belief (freedom of conscience) has in the same way as other human rights a political and a moral value as well as an empowering function. This is not to explain away that there are sometimes tensions and conflicts between different human rights. But freedom of religion or belief is intrinsically linked to and cannot be dissociated from other human rights. It is together and in harmony between them that a diverse and democratic society can be built.

Minority rights as a misleading concept for Christian communities in the Middle East

A significant contribution of *We Choose Abundant Life* deals with the diversity in Middle Eastern societies and at the same time the scope of human rights is connected to the discourse of minority and majority. To understand the special situation in the Middle East regarding the situation of minorities, the document provides inputs that go back in history.

First, “the millet system” that existed during the time of the Ottoman Empire is mentioned (para. 65). For Christians in the Middle East, the meaning of the term is self-evident, while for Westerners it is largely unknown. It was a time when Christians were “living (as ‘dhimmis’) under the protection of Muslims” (para. 45). The term *millet* in the Ottoman legal system defined the status of the non-Muslim religious communities in the empire.²⁴ Primarily, the Christian and Jewish Ottoman subjects were considered members of their millet community. They were

²³ See for example “What are human rights?”

²⁴ Dimitrios Stamatopoulos, “From Millets to Minorities in the 19th-Century Ottoman Empire: An Ambiguous Modernization,” in *Citizenship in historical perspective*, eds. Steven Ellis, Guðmundur Hálfðanarson and Ann Katherine Isaacs (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2006), 253–73.

[...] tolerated to exist with their belief systems and religious practices but only at the expense of inegalitarian obligations and responsibilities. Putting the matter differently, privileges and obligations were distributed not on the basis of political membership to the Ottoman state, but on the particularistic basis of peoples' communal membership.²⁵

Second, *We Choose Abundant Life* describes the next period as “the multifaceted colonisation” with the break-down of the Ottoman empire. The diversity of the society continued but the concept of millet was replaced by the concept of minority but still within the old sphere of thought. The new situation “failed to create frameworks that allowed local communities to manage their religious and ethnic diversity” (para. 8).

Third, based on the present-day situation with the division between minority and majority *We Choose Abundant Life* argues strongly against any search for protection through an “alliance of minorities” in order to be “a guarantee of a continued Christian presence in the Middle East” (para. 9, 94). This feeling of being a minority, also goes into the official Church institution and the relation to the state and a “minority mentality, and a pursuit of narrow sectarian gains” (para 51). The church needs to deconstruct a “minority complex”, the “minority-majority formula” and the “dilemma of minority submission to majorities” (para. 57, 60). Frequently, the process is named as a transition from sectarianism. It is about fundamentally questioning a point of departure in the majority-minority division. This position is underlined in a comment from Agenzia Fides who believes that the idea of protection through an alliance of minorities seeking guarantees of continuous presence is a distorted reading of reality.²⁶

Now it might be interesting to relate this discussion to how human rights look at majority – minority. Since it is about the right to have religion and to practice, the human rights agenda basically uses Freedom of religion or belief (Freedom of conscience). Although this in itself is an individual right, it is also within the paradigm of Christianity associated with uniting together with others of the same belief. *We Choose Abundant Life* points to Acts 2.42, Phil. 2.2 and Jn 17 as examples and added can be, for example, “[f]or where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Mt 18.20).

²⁵ Ahmet İçduygu and B. Al[ıdot] Soner, “Turkish minority rights regime: Between difference and equality,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 42, no. 3 (2006): 447–68.

²⁶ Agenzia Fides, “Document on the future of Christians in the Middle East: Western «protections» or «alliances between minorities» do not help us,” [fides.org/en/news/70874-ASIA_MIDDLE_EAST](https://www.fides.org/en/news/70874-ASIA_MIDDLE_EAST), accessed June 10, 2024.

In human rights language, there is the use of “minority” as in, for example, persons belonging to “ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities.”

In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language.²⁷

The UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights declares that “no satisfactory universal definition of the term ‘minority’ has proved acceptable.”²⁸ The risk is obvious that the emphasis on being a minority often led to the creation of a view which meant that the majority environment may consider a minority as “the other” or even the “other citizen.” In many cases they can be considered and treated in a special way and with special attitudes and restrictions. In some cases, enemy images can be created by demonizing or dehumanizing the other, the person belonging to a minority. When minorities are perceived as strangers not belonging, it can be declared that they should leave and go somewhere they really belong while the vulnerable person may not feel like a stranger from his/her point of view, but as part and parcel of the society as a whole. So, there is an obvious risk that the very division into minority and majority creates tensions and exclusions. In the case law on minority rights, it also appears that those who claim protection with reference to religious minority “have largely been excluded from consideration under the umbrella of minority rights.”²⁹

It seems clear, based on the background of Christian communities in the Middle East, that from a rights perspective, emphasizing the rights of religious minorities is not a way forward to give everyone equal value and citizenship in a state. This is an extremely important aspect when the authors of *We Choose Abundant Life* seek to establish challenges and visions for Middle Eastern Christians.

So, returning to the concept of freedom of conscience, it seems to be a fair way for the future. Having said this, it needs to be further

²⁷ “International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,” art. 27. For the use of minorities in this respect see: Göran Gunner and Pamela Slotte, “The Rights of Religious Minorities,” in *Human Rights, Religious Freedom and Faces of Faith*, eds. Göran Gunner, Pamela Slotte and Elizabeta Kitanović (Geneva: Globethics.net, 2019), 29–47.

²⁸ “Fact Sheet No.18 (Rev.1), Minority Rights,” <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FactSheet18rev.1en.pdf>, accessed June 10, 2024.

²⁹ Nazila Ghanea, “Are Religious Minorities Really Minorities?” *Oxford Journal of Law and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2012): 60.

investigated whether the international terminology around freedom of religion or belief can, to a large extent, be an instrument for what the authors are striving for. “The crown of all freedoms” will for sure replace “alliance of minorities.”

A note on vulnerable groups (women and young people)

In this article it has been stated that human rights apply to each and every individual. When it comes to the fact that these rights are not met or that they are violated, it is clear that certain categories are treated more harshly than others. In the human rights system, they have been designated as vulnerable and marginalized groups such as women, children, minorities, refugees and migrant workers.³⁰

Here, some notes on women and young people who are not only disadvantaged in relation to states but also to a great extent internally in various Christian communities. In the Middle Eastern churches with a “patriarchal masculinized system”, where women are marginalized in decision-making and as “second-class beings”, there is a need for a radical change, both in mentality and practice (para. 34, 69, 86). Within the UN system there are clear legal commitments based on an explanation of the meaning of discrimination against women:

[...] any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.³¹

Although it is, according to the UN human rights system, the state’s responsibility to implement the convention’s various commitments, it is the moral obligation of, for example, churches to establish conditions that give women equal rights. *We Choose Abundant Life* clearly marks that the issue of the situation of women is a human rights issue. This applies to the state’s commitments and to a clearer degree the responsibility of the Christian communities is emphasized.

Not least in light of the uprisings of the Arab Spring, young people are highlighted (para. 22, 48, 54). Their voices and involvement are stated

³⁰ See for example Bielefeldt, Ghanaea and Wiener, *Freedom*, 363–478.

³¹ “Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women,” art. 1, ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/, accessed April 23, 2025.

to be excluded in political, religious, and public affairs and it is declared as a major threat to the future of religious communities.

Christians in their Churches must **listen deeply to the voice of young people, their visions for renewal, positive potentials, critical thinking, and ambitions for development.** (...) **Christian youth are not only the future of the Churches, but also their present, and they must play a primary role in building the society of citizenship.** (para. 87)³²

The relation to young people turns out to be a central issue in the challenges and policies presented by *We Choose Abundant Life*. First, it can be argued that young people naturally fall under the same human rights standards that apply to all individuals. At the same time, according to the Convention of the Rights of the Child, young people can also be placed under the category of children if they are under 18 years of age. This means that they end up in a vulnerable group.

States Parties shall assure to the “child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child.”³³ The only restriction is that consideration must be given to the child’s age and the maturity of the child. Four basic principles are guiding the convention and the attitude towards children by states as well as a moral duty for religious communities.³⁴ One is to take the child’s views into account and another already dealt with is the right to life (survival and development), art. 6. A third principle is non-discrimination (art. 2). A fourth decisive principle is the one that puts the best interests of the child first, including young people.

The need to listen to and involve the youth is in reality a challenge that by no means applies only to states and churches in the Middle East, but is a global challenge. With *We Choose Abundant Life* in focus, Johnny B. Awwad looks upon the document as appealing “for the churches in the Middle East to allow young people and women their active involvement in the life, and the decision-making circles of the churches [...]”.³⁵ An extremely important challenge that can be extended to a number of states and Christian communities.

³² Bold is used in the original text.

³³ “Convention of the Rights of the Child,” art. 12.

³⁴ See for example Unicef, “Four principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child,” [unicef.org/armenia/en/stories/](https://www.unicef.org/armenia/en/stories/), accessed June 10, 2024.

³⁵ Johnny B. Awwad, “The Old-New Question of Middle Eastern Christians’ Identity,” *The Near East School of Theology Theological Review* 43, no. 1 (2022): 73–81.

Common good, God, and Human Rights – a useful tool for theology?

Certainly, there were voices from the Christian side when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was drawn up, such as Eleanor Roosevelt (US) and René Cassin (France). But, the adoption of the declaration as well as subsequent conventions is a decision within the framework of the UN by the member states. In this way, the human rights bill can be seen as secular commitments of states. When religions and Christian communities therefore look at human rights, there are different ways to go. One is to seek justifications based on holy scriptures. Another is to use other concepts like human dignity. And yet another to look upon the concept of human rights as useful for what constitutes the church's task and vision.

The World Council of Churches (WCC) has consistently emphasized the importance of human rights, advocating for justice, peace, and the protection of human dignity across the globe and realized early on that the emerging human rights system could be an instrument for churches. Their stance on human rights can be summarized as follows: "The gospel leads us to become ever more active in identifying and rectifying violations of human rights in our own societies, and to enter into new forms of ecumenical solidarity with Christians elsewhere who are similarly engaged."³⁶ Charles Villa-Vincencio is one of the most prominent religious voices in South Africa when it comes to human rights issues and theology. In the aftermath of apartheid, he described his view of the task of theology:

To the extent that it provides a basis for ideological critique, while contributing to a better understanding of humanity, as a basis for the promotion of such rights that sustain human dignity, a theological silence in the face of human rights violations can only be constructed as morally repugnant and socially irresponsible. (...) The task of theology is to help locate the human rights struggle at the centre of the debate on what it means to be human and therefore also at the centre of social and political pursuit.³⁷

Christian communities can facilitate Christians to appropriate and implement the values embodied in the human rights culture as well as exposing oppression and reporting abuse and violations.

³⁶ *Human Rights: A Global Ecumenical Agenda* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1993).

³⁷ Charles Villa-Vincencio, "Theology and Human Rights," in *Human Rights & Religion: A Reader*, ed. Liam Gearson (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2002).

So, in what way is theology and the society based on democracy, equal citizenship and human rights talking the same language. A theological basis for human rights is articulated in statements and documents issued by the World Council of Churches as well as by a range of Christian denominations. The base of Christian vision and message is then linked with universal human rights principles.

The last sentence in *We Choose Abundant Life* is important as a summary combining a just and humane society with the kingdom of God. Furthermore, God's desire for life for the individual is aimed at a humane society.

Our aim must be a more just and humane society in which the kingdom of God may be fulfilled, so that human beings may receive life as God has desired it for them, according to the words of Christ in the Gospel of John: "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." (Jn 10.10) (para. 100)

This takes us back to the watchwords which are used for forming choices and policies for, in this case, Middle Eastern societies. George Sabra captures in an excellent way the watchwords: "And the call for political structures in society and state – in which all are equal and in which human rights, freedom, justice, and democracy reign supreme – is prominent."³⁸ It could be boiled down to the fact that it is about human rights and democracy – and theology.

There is one more key expression appearing frequently in *We Choose Abundant Life* and that is "common good" as in "the common good for all people in the Middle East" and "the pursuit of the common good" not the least as it is connected to public affairs. Christians, men and women as well as churches together with others should "contribute to the common good" (para. 4, 6, 63, 83, 91, 95). Also, the discussion on the common good is deeply connected with the public sphere and a dialogue with Christians, church authorities, people of other faiths and with civil society and organizations. The starting point takes its justification in a biblical quote from JN 8,32: "You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (para. 6).

It is then possible to combine a "humane society in which the kingdom of God may be fulfilled" and "the common good for all people in the Middle East." The secular concepts of human rights and democracy seem to go hand in hand with the theological concept of Kingdom of God in the making of the common good. This intention can also be seen, as

³⁸ Sabra, "Impressive and Unprecedented," 67.

mentioned above, when talking about the emancipation of women, when the document refers both to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to Gal. 3.28.

If, in the interaction between theology and human rights, we focus on the concept of the common good, a pattern can be seen. An ideological starting point for the idea of God's kingdom is common good for the individual with citizenship in the kingdom. The starting point found in human rights is common good with the rights of each individual in the society in which they live. While the common good is the starting point, it is also the end goal and a vision of the future. In addition, the idea of God's kingdom and human rights are tools for analyzing man's current situation and for implementing a new one with hope for the future.

This is the framework for how, in spite of church failure, diversity and equal citizenship is a way forward. *We Choose Abundant Life* chooses the concept forward to be synodality – “communion and walking together.” The document has through its working method, analysis, conclusions and recommendations a reach far beyond the Middle East and challenges religious communities around the world to develop choices and policies for a common good based on theology in combination with human rights and democracy. And for Christians in the Middle East, it may inspire a continuing presence.