

The Religions of Human Rights*

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■ Abstract

The modern human rights movement arose during a moment of unprecedented encounter between global religions in the mid-twentieth century. Yet attempts to parse the historical relationship between human rights and religious thought have almost exclusively taken the form of case studies of individual religious traditions. This focus on intellectual genealogies obscures the fact that much of human rights doctrine emerged from interreligious contacts and conflicts between Judaism and Christianity, particularly in the context of the decolonizing Middle East. This article retraces this interreligious encounter through the writings of Amnesty International founder Peter Benenson, diplomat and theologian Charles Malik, and rabbi and activist Maurice Perlzweig. Together they represent three different theopolitical responses to the problem of religious pluralism after global empire: minoritarian human rights, majoritarian human rights, and cosmopolitan human rights. Recovering these interrelated human rights conceptions exposes the frames of religious difference embedded in the modern Western human rights imagination.

■ Keywords

human rights, Christianity, Judaism, Middle East, pluralism, cosmopolitanism

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■ A Prayer for the Persecuted

On February 17, 1962, Peter Benenson, a recent Jewish convert to Catholicism, asked the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel to pray with him. His new organization, Amnesty International, planned a “World Day of Prayer for the Persecuted” to be held on April 8, Passion Sunday, the first day of the two-week period preceding Easter. Christian communities around the world were joining together on that day to recite a “Prayer for the Persecuted,” especially composed for the occasion by the archbishop of Westminster, the de facto head of the British Catholic Church. Benenson wrote to the Jewish spiritual leader to ask that Jews participate in the exercise. Would the rabbi lead world Jewry in praying with Christians for the common cause of human rights?¹

In his reply, the “Rishon Le-Zion,” Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim, politely declined. He sympathized with the idea of prayer for the oppressed, his secretary explained, but the date in question fell within the Hebrew month of Nissan. During that time Jews customarily refrained from prayers “characterized by agony or sorrow,” because of their joy at the impending holiday of Passover. Undeterred, Benenson wrote back with an alternative proposal. Later that same year, on Monday, December 10, UN Human Rights Day, churches would once more join in coordinated prayer. Jewish prayers would be most welcome. They might even be performed on the proximate Sabbath, he helpfully added. His effort was again rebuffed.²

Why was it so important for Benenson to secure Jewish participation in his international prayer campaign? Certainly, religion offered an attractive tool with which to forge Amnesty’s “Community of Conscience” stretching “over frontiers of belief and nationality.”³ Benenson and his colleagues dispatched similar entreaties to Muslim, Bahai, and other religious groups. Prayer evidently beckoned as an innocuous means of ethical mobilization for human rights. Parallel liturgical texts might be tailored to accommodate religious differences. Prayer times could be loosely synchronized. Indeed, in his reply to the rabbi, the former Jew pointedly quoted the Hebrew date, albeit incorrectly, to display his sensitivity to Jewish liturgical time. Benenson’s overture also resonated with that year’s Second Vatican Council, in which the Roman Catholic Church repudiated its own historical anti-Semitism.⁴

Yet below the placid surface of his pluralist entreaty lurked a more complex theological motive. Benenson confided to his friend and Amnesty cofounder Eric Baker that he regarded the human rights organization as “a part of the Christian

¹ Letter from Secretariat, Office of the Sephardic chief rabbi of Israel, to Peter Benenson, 20 March 1962, International Institute for Social History, Amsterdam, Amnesty International Archive (cited hereafter as IISH, AI), File 1026.

² Letter from Peter Benenson to the Yitzhak Nissim, 30 March 1962, IISH, AI 1026.

³ Peter Benenson, “Are You a Fisherman,” IISH, AI 1008.

⁴ John Connelly, *From Enemy to Brother: The Revolution in Catholic Teaching on the Jews, 1933–1965* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

witness.”⁵ Amnesty’s goal was to offer every person a chance to become “like Christ reborn,” including those “member[s] of the race from which God chose the mother to His son.”⁶ This ostensibly secular enterprise was shot through with barely concealed Christian beliefs. We might then reasonably ask: Did Benenson seek out a Jewish partner to widen the appeal of human rights? Or to realize his religious theology?

The modern human rights movement arose during a moment of unprecedented encounter between global religions. After a long nineteenth century in which religious humanitarianism largely took the form of Christian missionary work, imperial military intervention, and intrareligious relief campaigns, the leading mid-twentieth-century exponents of human rights embraced religion as a general philosophical foundation for cosmopolitan internationalism.⁷ Across the 1940s and 1950s, the religious grounds of human rights featured prominently in diplomatic dialogues and international nongovernmental activism. The quest for a secularized natural law spurred a roster of new interfaith political alliances and comparative intellectual inquiries. Yet the religious dynamics of all this interreligious activity remained decidedly ambiguous. Benenson’s prayer drive suggested just how blurred the line was between Christianity as a secular, contingent tool for burnishing the preexisting authority of human rights and Christianity as a theological force animating the moral imagination. It was not always clear where faith stopped and politics began. Or where the boundary lay between secular and religious. Or, for that matter, where the borderlines and fault lines lay *between* religions.

The “between” is the crucial factor that concerns us here. Almost without exception, attempts to parse the historical relationship between human rights and religion have taken the form of case studies of individual religious traditions. Rejecting confessional approaches that locate some essential human rights principles lurking in premodern texts, historians and religion scholars have traced the continuities and ruptures between classical Christian theology and mid-twentieth-century Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox conceptions of human rights.⁸ They have likewise exposed the absence of Christian-style natural law or an

⁵ Letter from Peter Benenson to Eric Baker, 21 July 1967, IISH, AI 1008.

⁶ Letter from Peter Benenson to Eric Baker, 15 February 1961, IISH, AI 1163; Letter from Peter Benenson to Clara Urquhart, 23 October 1962, quoted in Tom Buchanan, *Amnesty International and Human Rights: Activism in Postwar Britain, 1945–1977* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020) 274.

⁷ *Religious Internationals in the Modern World: Globalization and Faith Communities since 1750* (ed. Abigail Green and Vincent Viaene; Palgrave Macmillan Transnational History Series; London: Palgrave, 2012); Mark Goodale and Samuel Moyn, *Letters to the Contrary: A Curated History of the UNESCO Human Rights Survey* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

⁸ Linde Lindkvist, *Religious Freedom and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) 11–43; idem, *Christian Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); Udi Greenberg and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins, “Introduction: Special Forum on Christianity and Human Rights,” *JHI* 79 (2018) 407–9; Sarah Shortall, “Theology

individual rights tradition in classical Judaism.⁹ This has led to a default emphasis on secularization as the defining process by which religious thinkers rummaged in the storehouses of their traditions in order to “rediscover” ideas such as the sacredness of the individual human that, *mutatis mutandis*, matched the intellectual and legal culture of the twentieth century.¹⁰ This revisionist approach rightly corrects for historical anachronism.¹¹ The usable past conjured up by human rights proponents should not be mistaken for deep historical origins. Still, the polycentric study of religion and human rights remains trapped in a set of unifocal frames of inquiry: Christian human rights, Jewish human rights, Muslim human rights, and so on.¹² Indeed, on this model, world religions first met modern rights, and only afterwards did their adherents confront one another’s contrasting visions in the realm of international institutions and legal projects. The preoccupation with the emergence of religious human rights, in other words, still privileges individual genealogies over their points of historical interaction. What is lost as a result is any sense of how these spiritualized human rights visions are themselves products of a twentieth-century globalizing world of religious pluralism.¹³ To historicize fully

and the Politics of Christian Human Rights,” *JHI* 79 (2018) 445–60; *Christianity and Human Rights Reconsidered* (ed. Sarah Shortall and Daniel Steinmetz-Jenkins; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); and *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction* (ed. John Witte and M. Christian Greene; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁹ James Loeffler, *Rooted Cosmopolitans: Jews and Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018); Louis Henkin, “Judaism and Human Rights,” *Judaism* 25 (1976) 435–46; Jonathan Crane, “Why Rights? Why Me?” *JRE* 35 (2007) 559–89; David Novak, *Covenantal Rights: A Study in Jewish Political Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 26–35; and Samuel Moyn, “Louis Henkin, Human Rights, and American Jewish Constitutional Patriotism,” in *The Law of Strangers: Jewish Lawyers and International Law in the Twentieth Century* (ed. James Loeffler and Moria Paz; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019) 93–117.

¹⁰ For a sensitive probing of the conjunctions of secular and sacred in the 1940s human rights moment, see Jenna Reinbold, *Seeing the Myth in Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017). On the broader questions of secularization and global religion, see José Casanova, *Global Religious and Secular Dynamics: The Modern System of Classification* (Brill Research Perspectives in Religion and Politics; Leiden: Brill, 2019).

¹¹ For a good overview of the canonical narratives and new approaches, see Miia Halme-Tuomisaari and Pamela Slotte, “Revisiting the Origins of Human Rights: Introduction,” in *Revisiting the Origins of Human Rights* (ed. Miia Halme-Tuomisaari and Pamela Slotte; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) 1–38.

¹² On polycentrism and human rights history, see Jan Eckel, *The Ambivalence of Good: Human Rights in International Politics since the 1940s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

¹³ On the modernity of “religion” and “human rights” as categories, see Leora Batnitzky, “From Collectivity to Individuality: The Shared Trajectories of Modern Concepts of ‘Religion’ and ‘Human Rights,’” in *Religion and the Discourse of Human Rights* (ed. Hanoch Dagan, Shahr Lifshitz, and Yedidia Z. Stern; Jerusalem: Israel Democracy Institute, 2014) 547–72. On the emergence of the concept of religious pluralism in European thought, see Udi Greenberg, “Catholics, Protestants, and the Violent Birth of European Religious Pluralism,” *AHR* 124 (2019) 511–38; H. S. Jones, “Catholic Intellectuals and the Invention of Pluralism in France,” *Modern Intellectual History* 18 (2021) 497–519; pub. online by Cambridge University Press, 25 September 2019; and *Religious Pluralism: A Resource Book* (ed. Aurélie Bardou et al.; Florence: European University Institute, 2015).

the relationship between religion and human rights, then, we need to recover the interreligious dynamics present in the moment of their creation.

The origins story of Peter Benenson (1921–2005) and the creation of Amnesty International affords us one glimpse of this kind of complicated interreligious encounter. Others present themselves through the careers of two other key mid-twentieth-century figures: Rabbi Maurice Perlzweig (1895–1985) and Greek Orthodox Christian theologian Charles Malik (1906–1987). Between them, these three men respectively encapsulate what might be conventionally identified as Jewish, Christian, and, in the case of Benenson, Judeo-Christian human rights traditions. Each of these individuals has received attention in recent scholarship on the postwar origins of international human rights.¹⁴ But the question of how their interactions with other religions and their own theological views actively shaped their human rights visions has not been answered. Hence, in this essay, I reexamine the threads tying religion to human rights by way of the following thesis: modern human rights arose after the Second World War less as a progressive secularization of religious eschatology than as a novel set of solutions to the problem of religious pluralism after empire. In a world shifting from Christian and Muslim empires to ethnoreligious nation-states, older forms of religious internationalism no longer fit the emerging global order.¹⁵ The new discourse of a single humanity divided into discrete sovereign nation-states fundamentally destabilized the civilizational, racial, and imperial frameworks that had sustained earlier religious universalisms, even if it did not fully dismantle them. Global religions no longer matched any of the basic units of global politics. Sectarianism and nationalism jostled in the confines of the territorial state. War, decolonization, and Cold War geopolitical division reapportioned religious communities into sovereign citizenries. As a result, these thinkers grasped for a moral language that could reconcile global religion with the nation-state. They found a solution in the emerging doctrine of human rights.

Despite common concerns, the ideas put forward by these individuals were by no means identical. Indeed, when we compare their thinking, what emerges is a tripartite set of approaches that we might call minoritarian human rights, majoritarian human rights, and cosmopolitan human rights. In his Jewish minoritarian approach, Perlzweig envisioned human rights as a pluralist survival

¹⁴ Loeffler, *Rooted Cosmopolitans*; Nathan Kurz, *Human Rights and Jewish Internationalism after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Glenn Mitoma, *Human Rights and the Negotiation of American Power* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Alexandre Lefebvre, *Human Rights and the Care of the Self* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018) 141–64; Buchanan, *Amnesty International*.

¹⁵ On the larger ties between nationalism, human rights, and decolonization, see Eric Weitz, *A World Divided: The Global Struggle for Human Rights in the Age of Nation-States* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Bradley Simpson, “Self-Determination, Human Rights, and the End of Empire in the 1970s,” *Humanity* 4 (2013) 239–60; and Willem Gravett, “The Smutsian Concept of ‘Human Rights,’” *South African Journal on Human Rights* 32 (2016) 538–55.

strategy for a world of nationalized minority religions. By contrast, in his Christian majoritarian approach, Malik sought to neutralize religious pluralism and its ties to nationalism by imagining humanity as a single Christian community of individual believers. Finally, in his Judeo-Christian cosmopolitanism, Benenson rejected the very categories of religious majority and minority. Instead, he recast humanity as members of a postvernacular Christian faith.¹⁶ This taxonomy of minoritarian, majoritarian, and cosmopolitan reflects both the underlying logic and the programmatic aspirations of these men.

None of these visions developed in isolation from one other. In fact, these religious human rights visions grew precisely out of interreligious frictions in the decades surrounding the Second World War. That historical process unfolded in different ways depending on time and place. American Protestant thinkers, for instance, used the human rights idiom to recalibrate their relations with Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam in the context of rising American global power.¹⁷ European Catholics and Protestants found in human rights a moral language to restore Europe's religious equilibrium and rally against the dangers of secular statism and totalitarian atheism.¹⁸ Confucian and Hindu thinkers grappled with how to assimilate their traditions into Western categories in the context of decolonization and Communist revolution.¹⁹ Benenson, Malik, and Perlzweig, by contrast, represented a group of thinkers transiting the uncertain pathways linking Holocaust-era Christian Europe to the decolonizing Middle East. Their universalist visions tracked closely against the region's political conflicts and ideological debates stemming from the newly imposed boundaries of nationhood. Despite their divergent answers, they each responded to the same question of how to imagine global religious difference after the end of empire.²⁰

¹⁶ Stephen Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

¹⁷ K. Healan Gaston, *Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); David Hollinger, *Protestants Abroad: How Missionaries Tried to Change the World but Changed America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Jonathan Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America's Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gene Zubovich, "American Protestants and the Era of Anti-Racist Human Rights," *JHI* 79 (2018) 427–43, at 427–31; and Lauren Turek, *To Bring the Good News to All Nations: Evangelical Influence on Human Rights and U.S. Foreign Relations* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020).

¹⁸ Moyn, *Christian Human Rights*, 65–132; James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018) 169–75; Marco Duranti, *The Conservative Human Rights Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ Manu Bhagavan, "A New Hope: India, the United Nations and the Making of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," *Modern Asian Studies* 44 (2010) 311–47; Hans Roth, *P.C. Chang and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2018).

²⁰ On decolonization and human rights in the Middle East, see Andrew Arsan, "'A Unique Little Country': Lebanese Exceptionalism, Pro-Americanism and the Meanings of Independence in the Writings of Charles Malik, c. 1946–1962," in *Decolonization and the Cold War: Negotiating Independence* (ed. Leslie James and Elisabeth Leake; London: Bloomsbury, 2015) 107–22; Fabian

■ Minoritarian Human Rights: A Jewish Story

Maurice Perlzweig is easily the most prominent rabbi to be found in the history of twentieth-century international human rights. Over the course of a seven-decade career, he fought for minority rights at the interwar League of Nations, organized the rescue of Jews in Europe and the Middle East in the 1940s and 1950s, and worked at the postwar United Nations on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the Genocide Convention, and the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Equally importantly, as long-time UN representative of the World Jewish Congress, he led the rise of the modern international nongovernmental organization, earning the sobriquet, “Mr. NGO” in diplomatic circles.

Religious Judaism played an undeniably central part in Perlzweig’s worldview and activism. As a cofounder of the World Union for Progressive Judaism, he blazed a path for Liberal Judaism across Europe and the world. As a long-time pulpit rabbi in England and Canada, he taught a generation of Anglo-Jewish elites (and their children, through his stint as Jewish chaplain at Eton) and the public at large about the moral visions of Judaism. Even so, six decades of Perlzweig’s speech-making, memo-writing, and media appearances yield a surprisingly small number of explicit discussions of Judaism’s relationship to human rights. Even those that do often feature heavy disclaimers to the effect that there is no such thing as a unitary Jewish theological doctrine of human rights.²¹ Where, then, did he source his human rights vision?

The answer is politics. Before he became a Jewish human rights icon, Perlzweig was a Zionist internationalist.²² While the exclusionary face of Zionist ideology commands much of our attention today in the context of post-1948 Israel/Palestine, Perlzweig represented an influential earlier European branch of the national movement that understood Jewish self-determination both with and beyond territorial settlement in Palestine as a claim to moral autonomy for a

Klose, *Human Rights in the Shadow of Colonial Violence: The Wars of Independence in Kenya and Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013); Roland Burke, *Decolonization and the Evolution of International Human Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010); Jan Eckel, “Human Rights and Decolonization: New Perspectives and Open Questions,” *Humanity* 1 (2010) 111–35; and *Politics of Religious Freedom* (ed. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, Saba Mahmood, and Peter G. Danchin; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

²¹ See, for example, Perlzweig’s 1959 comment, “The meaning of the Jewish tradition for human rights” lies not in “theoretical terms” but in a concrete focus on securing justice for endangered “minorities” (quoted in World Jewish Congress, *Proceedings of the Fourth Plenary Assembly* [Geneva, 1959] 48); Maurice Perlzweig, “Human Rights and Responsibilities in Judaism,” *Bulletin of the World Federation of United Nations Associations* 22 (1967) 24–27.

²² For an overview of this term, see James Loeffler, “‘The Famous Trinity of 1917’: Zionist Internationalism in Historical Perspective,” *Jahrbuch des Simon-Dubnov-Institut / Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook* 15 (2016) 211–38. On the broader currents of religious internationalism, with special reference to Jewish internationalism, see Abigail Green, “Religious Internationalism,” in *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History* (ed. Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 17–37.

distinct, endangered national community.²³ Born in Habsburg Galicia and raised in London, Perlzweig grew up the son of a prominent Orthodox cantor who was also an early adherent of the Zionist movement and a good friend of its leader, Theodor Herzl. Perlzweig's father was even long rumored to have composed "Hatikvah," the Zionist national anthem. As a teenager, the younger Perlzweig embraced his father's politics but rejected his Orthodoxy. In its place, he received ordination in England's Liberal Judaism movement, also known as Progressive Judaism, a cousin of the more well-known American denomination of Reform Judaism. At the same time, thanks to his oratorical gifts, he became a precocious youth leader in the British Zionist movement at the fateful World War I-era moment in which the British government delivered an assortment of contradictory new promises regarding national self-determination in the post-Ottoman Middle East. Thereafter, the dialectical interplay between Perlzweig's "religious liberalism" and his ethnic nationalism would become the defining force in his human rights thought.²⁴

Like their American and German Reform cousins, British Progressive Jews opposed Zionism on ideological grounds as an improper politicization of Jewish identity. These liberal leaders insisted that Zionism was fundamentally illiberal in its character. Postbiblical Judaism was a universal religious creed with no national or ethnic dimensions. Zionism's collectivist vision of Jewish ethnonational identity violated that principle and exacerbated anti-Semitism by jeopardizing the process of liberal inclusion in modern Western democratic societies.²⁵ Perlzweig, by contrast, insisted that Liberal Judaism offered "spiritual self-emancipation" from antiquated Orthodoxy, while Zionism constituted the quintessence of political liberalism in the form of Jewish "national self-emancipation." By re-territorializing their nationhood in Palestine, Jews could achieve collective security and political dignity, free from the sway of mighty powers or the allure of "assimilation."²⁶

From his London pulpit and in the pages of his self-authored prayer book in the 1920s and 1930s, he preached a vision of modern Judaism as a naturalistic blend of liberal nationalism and religious universalism.²⁷ "I am convinced that Israel has a special place and function in the spiritual economy of mankind," he wrote in

²³ Dmitry Shumsky, *Beyond the Nation-State: The Zionist Political Imagination from Herzl to Jabotinsky* (New Haven: Yale University, 2018); Noam Pianko, *Zionism and the Roads Not Taken: Rawidowicz, Kaplan, Kohn* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010).

²⁴ Louis I. Newman, "The Compatibility of Zionism and Reform," in idem, *Anglo-Saxon and Jew: Jewish Questions of the Day; A Collection of Essays* (New York: Bloch, 1923) 83–89.

²⁵ James Loeffler, "Anti-Zionism," in *Key Concepts in the Study of Antisemitism* (ed. Sol Goldberg, Scott Ury, and Kalman Weiser; London: Palgrave, 2020) 42–43.

²⁶ "Zionism and Liberal Jews," *Liverpool Echo* (25 November 1929) 10; Maurice Perlzweig, "Liberal Jews and Zionism: Conflict or Co-operation," *The Monthly Pioneer* (October 1928) 8–9; Maurice Perlzweig, "Jewish Attitude to Arabs," *Manchester Guardian* (15 October 1936) 1, 11.

²⁷ Maurice Perlzweig, *Sabbath Services* (London, 1930); idem, "The Reminiscences of Maurice Perlzweig" (interview, Oral History Research Office, Columbia University, 1993) 260–64; idem, "Some Recollections of the First Minister," in *The First Fifty Years of Progressive Judaism at North London Progressive Synagogue, 1921–1971* (London: North London Progressive Synagogue, 1971) 1–9.

1928, “and I am prepared to believe that, given the will, he could mobilize all his scattered communities for the task of advancing the spiritual welfare of humanity.”²⁸ To do that, however, Jews would need to reenter “the life of humanity” as a self-governing nation anchored in its historic homeland. Like Muslim nationalists in India at the same time, Perlzweig saw late colonial modernity as a process that turned an ethnoreligious community into a national minority in need of protection from national majorities:

The underlying conception of the State is one that demands for it an absolute sovereignty over the individual, in the spiritual no less than in the political sphere. This conception, carried to its logical conclusion, leaves no room even for religious [or other] differences within the State. . . . Against that conception we have to oppose the view that, while all citizens of the State owe it uncompromising loyalty in matters which are properly the concern of the State, the human mind has other interests than those of political and tax-paying, and the life of the State, and of humanity as a whole, is enriched by the existence and the inter-play of groups with distinctive racial and spiritual inheritances and ideals.²⁹

As a result, he insisted on “the right of the Jews to exist as a separate group” as the building block of the modern global order.³⁰ This minoritarian vision animated Perlzweig’s support for Zionism and his investment in international minority rights, the key legal incarnation of human rights thinking between the nineteenth-century Rights of Man and later twentieth-century human rights. Like others in his day, he saw postwar Eastern Europe and the Middle East as a single postimperial world in which the combination of nation-states and international minority rights guaranteed by the League of Nations would provide opportunities for national self-determination and diasporic protection. He pursued this work chiefly through his leadership in the World Jewish Congress, a transnational nongovernmental organization committed to defending Jewish minority rights at the interwar League of Nations. A properly built international system would mediate between large and small religions, national majorities and national minorities, creating spaces for pluralism in a postimperial world. It would also provide a means to link the fate of the national minority with its kin-state, the national majority, in a harmonious vision of an ordered world.

At the heart of Perlzweig’s public theology lay a vision of collectivist universalism. The small size of Judaism in the global context of religions represented not a defect but a virtue. “Judaism is, undoubtedly, a universalistic religion, but its universalism springs from the quality of the Jewish faith, not the quantity of Jewish communities.”³¹ The “peculiar quality and genius” lay in its unique “synthesis of

²⁸ Maurice Perlzweig, “Opposing Loyalties,” *The New Judea* (25 January 1929) 73.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; Faisal Devji, *Muslim Zion: Pakistan as a Political Ideal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Yaacov Yadgar, *Sovereign Jews: Israel, Zionism, and Judaism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2017).

³⁰ Perlzweig, “Opposing Loyalties,” 73.

³¹ Perlzweig, “Liberal Jews and Zionism,” 8–9; *idem*, “The Liberal Jewish Congress in Berlin:

Universalism and Particularism.”³² His goal was not to Judaize the world through a universalization of Judaic values or legal principles but to embody difference as a defense against the coercive forces of statism and imperialism.

Looking back on his own interwar activism decades later, Perlzweig noted that it was thanks to the American Jewish social philosopher Horace Kallen that he entered this sphere of international human rights activism. Kallen’s concept of “cultural pluralism,” itself an extension of William James’s pluralism, provided the template for a progressive restructuring of modern society along naturalistic lines.³³ Each state would hold various religious and national communities together without compelling homogeneity at odds with the realities of global diversity after empire. This political theology, similar in respects to nineteenth-century Italian rabbi Elia Benamozegh and twentieth-century contemporary philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, suggested a vision of Jewish modernity that has been described as a model of “concrete, pluralistic universalism” in which “true unity would only be achieved through consciously channeled diversity.”³⁴

If there was a blind spot in Perlzweig’s field of vision, it lay in the direction of Palestinian self-determination. Convinced that Arab nationalism was a disingenuous exercise in antiliberal imperialism, Perlzweig clashed early on with Muslim and Christian Palestinian representatives who sought a separate Palestinian national right to existence. Many of these thinkers asserted an ecumenical vision of harmonious religious coexistence between Muslims, Jews, and Christians in late-Ottoman Palestine.³⁵ It was only with the advent of Zionism, a European colonial import, they argued, that the Arabized Jews, Muslims, and Christians of Palestine and surrounding countries began to fracture into divisive national groupings. To Perlzweig these claims constituted a denial of Jewish collective identity. Submerging Jews into an Arab civilization, he argued, amounted to a neo-imperial project of Arab national majoritarianism that would imperil Jews and destroy Jewish life as surely as had happened in Eastern Europe. Accordingly, he blithely dismissed Arab demands for self-determination in Palestine as disingenuous ideological maneuvers behind which lay the hand of European fascism. His conception of Jews as a global minority par excellence left him unable to see the colonial dimensions of his own Jewish politics as applied to interwar Palestine.

A Zionist Comment,” *The New Judea* (28 September 1928) 6–7.

³² Perlzweig, “Liberal Jewish Congress,” 6–7; idem, “Liberal Jews and Zionism,” 8; idem, “Israel among the Nations,” *Young Zionist* (August 1927) 13; idem, “Persönliches Bekenntnis,” *Jüdische Rundschau* (17 August 1928) 465.

³³ Perlzweig, interview, 465; Noam Pianko, “‘The True Liberalism of Zionism’: Horace Kallen, Jewish Nationalism, and the Limits of American Pluralism,” *American Jewish History* 94 (2008) 299–329.

³⁴ Clemence Bolouque, *Another Modernity: Elia Benamozegh’s Jewish Universalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020) 103, 121.

³⁵ Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019) 163–201.

The events of the 1940s further challenged Perzlweig's minoritarian vision of human rights. The Holocaust decimated European Jewry, reducing its surviving remnant in Eastern Europe to a captive community languishing under Communist rule, whose imagined ties to a global Jewish nation proved a focal point for lethal discrimination. The growing imperilment of Jewish communities across the Middle East in connection with the violent partition of Palestine also showed how Jewish interconnectedness could exacerbate collective vulnerability. The war itself and subsequent Arab-Israeli conflict raised painful questions about Jewish ethics and the exercise of power by a minority turned majority. Equally dismaying was the fate of minority rights in the international arena. Having fled to the United States during the war, Perzlweig found there, to his dismay, that the new rhetoric of human rights favored by American clergy, lawyers, and policymakers positioned individual liberties in opposition to minority group rights. As these ideas took hold in the emerging United Nations project, Perzlweig struggled to adapt his minoritarian vision.³⁶ The result was a curious hybrid rhetoric of human and minority rights. In sermons across the years 1948 and 1949, for instance, he endorsed the UDHR but insisted that alongside the "fundamental rights of human personality," the UDHR must continue to guarantee "equal human rights to any group in a national society." Both the rights of the individual and the "rights of a particular group" required protection in international law, he insisted, in order to secure "the welfare of humanity."³⁷

What Perzlweig most feared about the new individual human rights doctrine of the late 1940s was its implications for pluralism. In a libertarian world of atomized individuals, the majority might swallow up the minority, disrupting the natural diversity of humanity. Similarly, he decried the enthusiastic pronouncement of universal human rights without any accompanying legal structure to enforce them. When it came to human rights, "the new organization is authorized to preach against sin," he quipped, "but is not given the legal right to restrain the sinner."³⁸ Proclaiming humanity's rights without legalizing them would surely backfire. In fact, his critique of the spiritualization of rights anticipated precisely the theological move made by his friend and rival, Charles Malik.

■ Majoritarian Human Rights: A Christian Story

No other post-World War II public figure better articulated religion's relevance to human rights than Charles Malik. Throughout several decades of prominent leadership at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, including as a key

³⁶ Maurice Perzlweig, "The Ideal of Citizenship in Toronto," 20 February 1948, American Jewish Archives, Cincinnati, MS-361, World Jewish Congress Collection (cited hereafter AJA, WJC), Series B, Box B34, Folder 2, "Sermons."

³⁷ Maurice Perzlweig, "Rabbi Urges United Nations Act on Human Rights," 9 January 1948, AJA, WJC, Series B, Box B34, Folder 2, "Sermons."

³⁸ Maurice Perzlweig, "Jewish under the World Security Charter" (1945), AJA, WJC, Series B, Box B97, Folder 6, "San Francisco Charter, 1945-1946."

drafter of the UDHR, as well as in his scores of writings and public lectures, Malik consistently and passionately invoked the ties between religion and human rights. As a Lebanese Greek Orthodox Christian who embraced the Catholic Personalist doctrine of Jacques Maritain and other Neo-Thomists, Malik has often been viewed as a prototypical ecumenicalist and paradigmatic religious human rights thinker.³⁹ Yet, not only did he arrive late to human rights, adopting the term only in 1947 once he began work on the UN Commission on Human Rights, but Malik tempered his human rights ecumenicalism with profound conversionary yearnings toward Jews and Muslims.⁴⁰ Hence we are left with a puzzling disjuncture between the well-worn image of a liberal religious cosmopolitan and the clear evidence of a committed Christian evangelist.⁴¹

As in the case of Perzlweig, Malik's views on human rights emerged from the intersection between religion and nationalism in the context of a postimperial Middle East. Born and raised in a rural village in late-Ottoman Lebanon, Malik passed through Christian Protestant missionary schools and the American University of Beirut before venturing abroad to work in Cairo. In the early 1930s, he embarked on a doctoral degree in philosophy at Harvard under Alfred North Whitehead, along with one year spent studying with Martin Heidegger in mid-1930s Germany. Returning to Lebanon, he began a career as a philosophy professor at the American University until his appointment as Lebanese ambassador to the United States and the UN in 1945.

That year, 1945, also marked the date that Malik assumed the role of spokesman for the Arab League, a new pan-Arab nationalist organization. However, he resisted Arab nationalism's secularist pull and feared for the fate of Middle Eastern Christians under the impact of both Zionism and Islamism. As a result, Malik saw in human rights a solution to the dilemmas of minorityhood in a decolonizing Middle East.⁴² His majoritarian human rights vision emerged out of his larger confrontation with what he perceived to be the political pathologies of modern collectivism. In a world that increasingly fetishized groups and imperiled minorities, the sole solution was to protect and reconsecrate the individual. During his year in Germany, Malik witnessed firsthand the rise of European fascism—and even suffered anti-Semitic

³⁹ Mary Ann Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Johannes Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Challenge of Religion* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017).

⁴⁰ Lindkvist, *Religious Freedom*, 46–47.

⁴¹ Moyn, *Last Utopia*, 149.

⁴² For an account of the contested ascriptions of Western and Arab identity to Malik, see Glenn Mitoma, "Charles H. Malik and Human Rights: Notes on a Biography," *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly* 33 (2010) 222–41, at 222–23. For a reading of Malik as an "Asian" and "Third World" human rights ideologist, see Glenn Mitoma, "Mode d'assujettissement: Charles Malik, Carlos Romulo and the Emergence of the United Nations Human Rights Regime," in *Human Rights from a Third World Perspective: History and International Law* (ed. José-Manuel Barreto; Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013) 419–39.

harassment and violence because of being mistaken for a Jew.⁴³ Still, he focused not on the Nazi regime's anti-Semitism or anti-Christianity but instead on its idolatrous collectivism: "In 1935 A.D. you must belong to a Group, with a brilliant history, if you want to *be at all*. Being is Group-being and only Group-being. The individual is dead, wholly dead."⁴⁴

Faced with the threats of "spiritless secularism," Communism, and Fascism, Malik gravitated to neo-Thomist Catholic thought and from there to a religionized Rights of Man.⁴⁵ As he began to engage formally with human rights in the late 1940s, he stressed the common goal of re-enshrining the divine core of dignity within "the human person" as an inviolable sanctum impervious to temporal state power.⁴⁶ Across the late 1940s, Malik repeatedly returned to this theme, as evidenced by his famous quotation about the Universal Declaration: "We are trying in effect, knowingly or unknowingly, to go back to the Platonic-Christian tradition which affirms man's original, integral dignity and immortality."⁴⁷

Malik's faith permeated his public comments about the Christian meaning of human rights. Time and again in the drafting work for the Universal Declaration, he stressed this barely submerged Christian undercurrent. Convinced that the "eye of faith can see in practically every international situation the hidden hand of Christ," he insisted that "the whole modern movement for the rights of man is inspired directly or indirectly by the Christian conscience," defined as an exclusively Christian affirmation of "the original dignity of man," "the unity of man all over the world," and "the universality of the moral law."⁴⁸

Yet Christian human rights could never replace Christianity for Malik. The Church remained the best, and ultimately the only, solution to humanity's needs.⁴⁹ That left human rights spiritually suspect. If humanity embraced its rights but failed

⁴³ Roth, *P. C. Chang*, 130.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Mitoma, *Human Rights*, 117. On Malik's engagement with Heidegger, see Martin Woesner, "Provincializing Human Rights? The Heideggerian Legacy from Charles Malik to Dipesh Chakrabarty," in *Human Rights* (ed. Barreto) 65–101.

⁴⁵ Charles Malik, speech to the World Council of Churches, 18 August 1954, quoted in *The Evanston Report: The Second Assembly of the World Council of Churches 1954* (ed. Willem A. Visser't Hooft; New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., 1955) 37. For an acute analysis of the central place of personalism in Christian human rights thought, see Samuel Moyn, "Personalism, Community, and the Origins of Human Rights," in *Human Rights in the Twentieth Century* (ed. Stefan-Ludwig Hoffmann; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 85–106.

⁴⁶ Charles Malik, speech, 4 February 1947, quoted in *The Challenge of Human Rights: Charles Malik and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Habib C. Malik, ed., Oxford: Charles Malik Foundation; Centre for Lebanese Studies, 2000) 29.

⁴⁷ Charles Malik, "Human Rights and Religious Liberty," *Ecumenical Review* (1 January 1949) 404–9, at 404.

⁴⁸ Charles Malik, "Christian Morals in International Affairs," *Harvard Divinity School Bulletin* 24.1 (1960) 1–16, at 10–12. On conflicts with other drafters over this theistic agenda, see Roth, *P. C. Chang*, 177–78.

⁴⁹ Charles Malik, *Christ and Crisis* (1962; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 28; idem, "Christian Morals," 16.

to recognize their creator, they risked idolatry. Strikingly, already in 1948, as he worked to draft the UDHR, Malik lamented its desacralized character. As he wrote in the *American Bar Association Journal* in August of that year:

The real crisis in human rights . . . consists rather in the fact that people today do not believe they have natural, inherent, inalienable rights. . . . Having lost his hold on God, or more accurately, having blinded himself to God's constant hold on him, [modern man] seeks for his rights elsewhere in vain.⁵⁰

Moreover, the gap between religious origins and secular appropriations troubled Malik deeply. If human rights offered a poor, temporary placeholder for salvation, the new doctrine also exposed genuine Christianity to a constant danger of contamination by secularism. Speaking to a Presbyterian mission audience in New York, again in 1948, he dismissed the possibility of a post-religious human rights:

I find no evidence that this enlightened secularization of our religion was even the remotest intention—let along the practice—of our Lord or his Apostles or saints, or of the Fathers of the Church. I pray that the missionary movement will never allow itself to be deflected into purely humanitarian and secular. . . . Its task is, through every suffering . . . to mediate Jesus Christ himself . . . who alone can and does mightily save me every day from the grip of sin and death.⁵¹

Ultimately, Christianity would supersede human rights, unifying humanity and dissolving differences:

As in every crisis throughout the long record of human misery, the Church of Christ is the only real answer . . . I yearn and groan for nothing more than for the unity of the Body of our Lord. In that holy unity alone is man in all his possibilities completely revealed. What a pale and miserable phantom is all our activity for human rights by comparison with the humanity already achieved for all of us in Jesus Christ! Whatever we do with our human covenants, surely He is able to keep His covenant with us.⁵²

As a result, Malik viewed religious pluralism with skepticism and hostility. The problem of religious conflict ultimately could not be resolved other than by fusion inside Christianity. His dream of a mass conversion of the Middle East to Christianity bespoke a deep desire to replace the intermediate stage of human rights with a final human redemption. Human rights represented a fight on two fronts: against faithlessness and against other faiths.⁵³

⁵⁰ Charles Malik, "The Tragic Doubts of Men as to the Source of Their Individual Rights," *American Bar Association Journal* 34 (1948) 654–55, 694, at 655.

⁵¹ Charles Malik, speech to Presbyterian Board of Foreign Mission in New York, 20 April 1948, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Manuscript Division, Charles Malik Papers (hereafter cited as LC, MP), Box 209, F6.

⁵² Charles Malik, "The Spiritual Implication of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights," speech delivered to the World Council of Churches Commission of Churches on International Affairs, New York, 29 April 1949, quoted in *Challenge* (ed. Habib C. Malik), 137–38.

⁵³ I am indebted to Alexandre Lefebvre for this formulation.

Malik's antipathy to religious pluralism reflected itself in his turbulent relationship to Judaism and Zionism. In his diplomatic remarks at the UN, he lavished praise on Judaism's ethical content and noted the relevance of the Holocaust to the enterprise of human rights. But in other writings and speeches outside that forum, he rarely mentioned Judaism and conspicuously avoided the phrases "Judeo-Christian" or even "Judaean-Christian-Islamic."⁵⁴ Instead, he favored locutions such as the "Greco-Roman-European human tradition of thought and being." Judaism represented a wayward tributary from Christianity rather than a distinct separate religion. Moreover, Malik's positive public mentions of Jews and Judaism alternated with darkly anti-Semitic views of Jews and Zionists (sometimes used interchangeably), whom he accused of corrupting the Middle East and American Christianity alike with "messianic" Jewish tribalism and demonic manipulation.⁵⁵ Indeed, one could reasonably read Malik's human rights spiritualism as a bid to repress the Jewish-Zionist origins of much of the international human rights law in his day.⁵⁶

Malik's Christian supercessionism also led him to argue that only universal Christianity could do the work of religious conciliation.⁵⁷ In 1953, the English Protestant interfaith activist Reverend James Parkes wrote him to ask whether he might temper his anti-Zionist comments for the benefit of Middle Eastern peace.⁵⁸ Surely, all sides involved—"the British, the Arabs, the Jews and the Christian Churches"—shared responsibility for the crisis of Israel/Palestine.⁵⁹ Perhaps a more ecumenical spirit could help bring peace, he gently counseled. Malik rejected the idea out of hand:

Certainly Christianity and Islam are rooted in the Jewish religion, but you do not reconcile things by going back to their roots. . . . The road to reconciliation will be open only when the Jews acknowledge and serve Jesus Christ

⁵⁴ Quoted in Mitoma, *Human Rights*, 108.

⁵⁵ Charles Malik, draft speech, LC, MP, Box 209, Folder 6, "Speeches." This speech later ran as idem, "The Basic Issues of the Near East," *Annals of American Academy of Politics and Social Sciences* 258.1 (July 1948) 1–7.

⁵⁶ Rotem Giladi, *Jews, Sovereignty, and International Law: Ideology and Ambivalence in Early Israeli Legal Diplomacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); James Loeffler, "The 'Natural Right of the Jewish People': Zionism, International Law, and the Paradox of Hersch Zvi Lauterpacht," in *Law of Strangers* (ed. Loeffler and Paz), 23–42.

⁵⁷ Charles Malik, "The Elements of Western Faith," *Social Action* 16.9 (15 November 1950) 7.

⁵⁸ For more on this exchange, see James Parkes, *The Continuity of Jewish Life in the Middle East* (London: Anglo-Israel Association, 1963), and Robert Everett, *Christianity without Antisemitism: James Parkes and the Jewish-Christian Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 302–4.

⁵⁹ James Parkes, *A History of Palestine from 135 A.D. to Modern Times* (London: Gollancz, 1949) 361. Parkes arguably shared a minoritarian vision of human rights with Peretz Weizsäcker and his colleague Rabbi Stephen S. Wise; see James Parkes, *Judaism and Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948) 181, 190, and idem, *Prelude to Dialogue: Jewish-Christian Relationships* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1969) 192.

and the Moslems understand fully how they have departed from Him. He reconciles, and certainly not we nor any political movement.⁶⁰

■ The Limits of Pluralism

Across the 1940s and early 1950s, both Perlzweig and Malik viewed human rights in terms of a religiously pluralizing world. Perlzweig tried to enshrine that pluralism in communitarian human rights legislation; Malik regarded it as a menace to be overcome through a spiritualized individualism. Perlzweig envisioned a postimperial world of nation-states with diasporic kin minority communities. Malik feared for a Christianity facing encroaching religious and religion-like rivals.⁶¹ The intensification of anticolonial nationalism and the Cold War in the Middle East after 1948 brought increasing pressure to bear on each of these visions. For Malik, Soviet Communism, secular Pan-Arab nationalism, and Zionism together threatened to overwhelm Christian human rights. At home in Lebanon, the uneasy relations between Christians and Muslims raised the precise kinds of sectarian issues he had hoped to avoid. For Perlzweig, the realities of Zionist sovereignty compromised his Jewish vision of minoritarian human rights. Zionism's reconfiguration of religion and ethnicity within a Jewish nation-state achieved the opposite of his earlier vision. Rather than normalizing Jewish global status, the politicized ties between Jewish majorityhood in Israel and Jewish minorityhood thrust a new vulnerability on both East European and Middle Eastern communities. Having converted their religious nationhood into a secular nation-state, Jews themselves now faced the temptation to view the state as a spiritual end in and of itself and Palestinian difference as a threat to Jewish self-determination.⁶²

Perlzweig responded to this development with an outright turn to apologetics. In a 1961 lecture, he spoke unabashedly of "the fundamental doctrine of the rights of human personality which the religious genius of ancient Israel gave to the world, [and] which reached its highest expression in Hebrew prophecy and which Rabbinic Judaism expounded and developed."⁶³ Now Western monotheism, credited in the first instance to Judaism, provided the template for the moral universalism of human rights. At the same time, he urged Arab-Jewish rapprochement by insisting that anti-Semitism was a European Christian import into the Muslim Middle East. After the Six-Day War in 1967, as the image of Israel as a hulking military occupier began to predominate within international human rights contexts, Perlzweig slipped

⁶⁰ Letter from Charles Malik to J. W. Parkes, 15 January 1953, LC, MP, Box 209, F6. In 1954, an attempt by the World Council of Churches to issue a new theological statement on Jews and Judaism was derailed by Malik's direct intervention. See Hendrikus Berkhof, "Israel as a Theological Problem in the Christian Church," *JES* 6 (1969) 329–53, at 332, and Carl McIntire, *Servants of Apostasy* (Collingswood, NJ: Christian Beacon Press, 1955) 328–38.

⁶¹ Charles Malik, "The Peace of Man and the Peace of God," *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 49.2 (October 1955) 6–12, at 10–11.

⁶² Loeffler, *Rooted Cosmopolitans*, 168.

⁶³ Maurice Perlzweig, "Human Rights and Religion," *Jewish Advocate* (22 June 1961) 3a.

further into essentialist caprices. Retiring his earlier vision of a Jewish mission to perform ethical nationhood, he now reimagined the Jewish people as the physical incarnation of human rights, insisting that “today the Jew remains, even when he is not conscious of his Jewishness, the friend and the embodiment of human rights.”⁶⁴

Malik reacted with even greater alarm to decolonization’s challenge to Christianity. “The Christians all over the world,” he wrote in 1962, “are now more mingling and dealing with other religions and outlooks and points of view than ever before.” These new contacts risked overwhelming Christian faith. Worse still, the human rights movement had spawned its own kind of pseudo-religion, luring Christians into “some vague eclectic or pantheistic or humanitarian form of religion.”⁶⁵ “Human rights” now risked becoming just one of the “clichés,” “the silly slogans and stupid shibboleths” that “daily bombarded” Christians, along with “‘the free world,’ ‘Western civilization,’ ‘nuclear parity,’ ‘nuclear holocaust,’ ‘coexistence,’ [and] ‘social justice.’”⁶⁶

These lines come from Malik’s 1962 book, *Christ and Crisis*. That this book was published in the same year as the opening of the Second Vatican Council is hardly a coincidence. As we have seen, Jewish-Christian reconciliation deeply offended Malik’s own beliefs. Yet Vatican II was hardly the greatest blow to Malik’s dogma at the time. The very “humanitarian” religion of human rights that he feared had received a formal consecration in the form of an organization founded the year before: Amnesty International.

■ Cosmopolitan Human Rights: A Judeo-Christian Story

The mythological origins-story of Amnesty International comprises a tale of secular epiphany. In that narrative, Peter Benenson was an average middle-aged British barrister riding the London Tube to work one day in 1961, when his eye fell upon a newspaper article about two students imprisoned in Portugal for toasting freedom. Shocked out of his everyman apathy, he exited the subway, entered the Church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields to meditate, and reemerged with an idea for a worldwide movement to free political prisoners. Historians long ago exposed this conversion story as a later fabrication.⁶⁷ Yet they have ignored the fact that this invented road-to-Damascus tale conceals another quite real story of religious conversion. Benenson’s idea for Amnesty emerged in tandem with his own transformation from secular Jew into devout Catholic. The result was a curious hybrid ideology that

⁶⁴ Perlzweig, “Human Rights and Responsibilities,” 27.

⁶⁵ Malik, *Christ and Crisis*, 81–82.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁶⁷ For the canonical version, see Peter Benenson, “Dedication,” 28 February 1989, IISH, AI 928. On the debunking, see Tom Buchanan, “‘The Truth Will Set You Free’: The Making of Amnesty International,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 37 (2002) 575–97.

has been termed a “secular religion” and a “religionless Christianity.”⁶⁸ In truth, however, it is better understood as a post-Jewish form of Christian universalism.⁶⁹

As in the cases of Malik and Perlzweig, Benenson’s life stretched between the decolonizing Middle East and the postimperial Atlantic world. Born in 1921 into a family that rested at the pinnacle of the Anglo-Jewish elite, Benenson spent his earliest years in Jerusalem, where his father Harold Solomon served as a commander in the British Jewish Legion and then an official in the administration of the British Mandate of Palestine.⁷⁰ His mother, Flora (née Benenson) Solomon, daughter of a Russian émigré millionaire, parlayed her wealth, charisma, and connections into a career involving Jewish philanthropy and British left-wing activism.

Benenson’s parents showed little interest in the Jewish religion but shared a passionate Zionist faith. Consequently, Benenson developed close family ties to Chaim and Vera Weizmann, future first president and first lady of Israel, to the point of vacationing with them in Europe before World War II. His most sustained exposure to Judaism, ironically, came with his enrollment as a teenager at Eton College. There, he found a mentor in none other than Perlzweig, then serving as the school’s Jewish chaplain. On Sunday mornings, Perlzweig offered religious instruction to Jewish boys, while the rest of the student body attended school chapel. Such was his influence on Benenson that two decades later the latter tracked him down to seek his blessing for the launch of Amnesty.⁷¹

Most accounts of Benenson’s road to Amnesty stress his deep involvement in Labour Party politics and his legal activism on behalf of civil liberties at home and abroad in the 1950s. Yet what is forgotten is that up until the late 1950s, Benenson personally remained deeply enmeshed in the dramas of Middle Eastern decolonization. Beyond visiting the region regularly, particularly Cyprus, where he intervened as a lawyer in the violent conflict between Greek Orthodox, Turkish Muslims, and British colonial forces, he maintained extremely close ties to the Israeli political leadership.⁷² During the 1956 Suez War, while working officially as a correspondent for *The Spectator*, Benenson even served as a secret intermediary between the Israeli Labour government and the British Labour Party.⁷³ He continued to offer his services to the Israeli government as he traveled around the region

⁶⁸ Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame*, 52–72.

⁶⁹ Samuel Moyn and Alexandre Lefebvre, “The Subject of Human Rights,” in *The Subject of Human Rights* (ed. Danielle Celestine and Alexandre Lefebvre; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020) 244–46.

⁷⁰ Joseph Salmark, “Review of the Jewish Week,” *The Sentinel* (15 August 1930) 2.

⁷¹ On this episode, see Loeffler, *Rooted Cosmopolitans*, 216–17.

⁷² Brian Drohan, *Brutality in the Age of Human Rights: Activism and Counterinsurgency at the End of the British Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017) 36–40.

⁷³ Memo from Mr. Hugh Gaitskell to Mrs. Golda Meir, 13 November 1956, and Telegram from Foreign Ministry, Tel Aviv, to Israeli Embassy, London, 11 November 1956, Israel State Archives, Jerusalem (hereafter ISA) 329/8-תא, “British Labour Party.” For the context of Suez’s impact on British Jewish Labour politicians, see Jack Omer-Jackaman, *The Impact of Zionism and Israel on Anglo-Jewry’s Identity, 1948–1982* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2019) 46–51.

reporting from countries such as Lebanon, Syria, and Turkey.⁷⁴ Yet, in 1957, he broke with Judaism, converting to Catholicism. That decision formed the backdrop to the launching of Amnesty in 1961.

While parsing the motives for religious conversion is always difficult, in Benenson's case the outlines are quite clear. Years of travel in the Middle East combined with successive failed parliamentary campaigns back home soured him on the redemptive potential of secular politics. He outright despaired of the prospects for decolonization without massive violence and postcolonial injustice.⁷⁵ A passion for Zionism yielded to a darker view of all forms of postcolonial nationalism as dangerously fallible ideologies of difference. In Catholicism he found a means to overcome nationalism's limits, as well as the other global political fissures of the Cold War. Healing all these divisions required a new kind of spiritualized antipolitics.⁷⁶

Amnesty International began as a public campaign to mobilize grassroots activists to petition directly for the release of prisoners penalized solely for their political or religious beliefs. From the start, Benenson imagined this movement as "a spiritual union transcending national barriers."⁷⁷ That union would be Christian in form but open to all. It would be focused on man's "higher goal: to be Christ reborn" and yet also directed at a global audience so as "to give him who feels cut off from God, a sense of belonging to something much greater than himself, of being a small part of the entire human race."⁷⁸

What, then, was the precise relationship of Christianity to human rights in this endeavor? Benenson clearly conceptualized the endeavor as a religious mission for a fallen world. His early writings to his cofounder Eric Baker evince a deep longing for world unity and transcendence, and a desire to escape the political and national cleavages in the world and within himself. In the age of decolonization and Cold War, neither socialism nor nationalism any longer constituted liberating forces for humanity. Nationalism for the Jews had brought collective emancipation, but only at a steep moral price. Socialism had revealed its darker face in Eastern Europe. The postcolonial politics of Africa and the Afro-Caribbean looked no better. Colonizer, colonized, and decolonized had all succumbed to a vicious cycle of violence. Back home in Europe, the media had turned politics into an ongoing popularity contest. Even law itself had become an obstacle to progress, "The law

⁷⁴ Letter from Peter Benenson to Eliahu Elath, 21 December 1956, ISA, 329/8-πx; Peter Benenson, "The Zims of Syria," *The Spectator* (1 November 1957) 8–9; idem, "The Cadillacs of Lebanon," *The Spectator* (1 February 1957) 6; idem, "Going It Alone," *The Spectator* (26 June 1959) 2.

⁷⁵ For Benenson's thoughts on decolonization, see his "A Different Kind of Commonwealth?" *The Biggleswade Chronicle* (21 November 1958) 17.

⁷⁶ Moyn, *The Last Utopia*, 120–74. For the context of British decolonization's deep impact on British society and personal identity, see Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

⁷⁷ Letter from Peter Benenson to Eric Baker, 4 March 1960, IISH, AI 1163, "Correspondence from Peter Benenson to Eric Baker, 4 March 1960 to 11 October 1961."

⁷⁸ Letter from Peter Benenson to Eric Baker, 9 August 1961, IISH, AI 1163.

which was once designed as protection for individuals is now primarily used as an instrument to ensure the smooth functioning of State machinery.⁷⁹

The solution was not a return to God's law à la Malik but a new kind of Christian universalism. Strikingly, the new Catholic convert quickly adopted an iconoclastic liberal theology. Addressing a conference of Catholic lawyers in the summer of 1963, Benenson explained his understanding of the historic moment at hand:

It is frequently said that we are now living in the post-Christian era. This title may make a good chapter heading in a history book, but it contains little of the truth. It may be that we have come to the end of the age of superstitious Christianity. What is developing today, and is evidenced by gatherings of this character, is the beginning of reasoned Christianity.⁸⁰

His was a most heterodox conception of natural law as not a divine moral order but a human reordering of the world:

The true concept of natural law is that in inherent compliance with his predestined function to create order out of chaos man seeks to create ever-widening communities. From this it follows that anything which is conducive to the stability and ultimate growth of a community until it encompasses the whole earth is in accordance with natural law.⁸¹

Still, this Catholic universalism remained couched in theological terms as “the release of the enchained spirit of Man”:

Man's striving toward harmony on earth is thus an expression of God's will. Man's method of promoting harmony is by the creation of ever greater communities. Thus, man's desire to become part of a community is similarly an expression of God's will. . . . This search for a wider harmony involves the merging of the functions of one community into another greater community . . . [and eventually] a single world community.⁸²

It is tempting to read this vision as a secularized expression of liberal Catholicism or an ecumenical pluralism.⁸³ Unlike Malik, who dreamed of a theological restoration through the re-Christianization of the world, or Perlzweig, who imagined a Jewish-inflected pluralization of humanity, Benenson envisioned a diverse humanity united beyond religious difference in a single “world ideology.”⁸⁴ That cosmopolitan impulse led him to imagine all faiths united in a universal creed

⁷⁹ Peter Benenson, “Problems of the Catholic Lawyer,” *The Wiseman Review* 237 (Autumn 1963) 274; Letter from Peter Benenson to Eric Baker, 26 March 1960, IISH, AI 1163.

⁸⁰ Benenson, “Problems of the Catholic Lawyer,” 275–76.

⁸¹ Peter Benenson, “The Natural Law and the Statute Law: A Lawyer's View,” in *Understanding the Signs of the Times* (ed. Franz Bockle; Concilium: Theology in the Age of Renewal 25; New York: Paulist, 1967) 56–57.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Jan Eckel, *The Ambivalence of Good: Human Rights in International Politics since the 1940s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019) 159–89.

⁸⁴ Hopgood, *Keepers of the Flame*, 65.

without any doctrinal preconditions, let alone expectations of conversion. Yet he still insisted that human rights could not be a “post-Christian” movement. Like other universalisms, Benenson’s religion of human rights also struggled against its own vexed relationship with religious pluralism.⁸⁵ The drive to multifaith unity required a single Christian grammar. Pluralism could only ever serve as a practical tool, not as a theological end in and of itself. Other religions could join this quest but with, at best, honorary status.

One expression of that ambivalence came in Benenson’s crudely instrumental treatment of non-Christian religions in early Amnesty work. In January 1961, during the planning stages, he spoke in mercenary terms about interfaith outreach as an exercise in political optics. It wouldn’t do to have only Christians involved, he explained to colleagues in internal correspondence. A few Jews, Muslims, and others were required for balance.⁸⁶ This casual approach to non-Christian religions contrasted with the careful curation of Christian elements within Amnesty events. Benenson himself typically designed the actual Amnesty prayer services held annually on Human Rights Day, in which the Christian symbolism of the organization yielded to explicitly Christological liturgies.⁸⁷

A pseudo-pluralistic approach to Judaism also surfaced in Benenson’s own treatment of Judaism. As a public convert with well-known ties to Israel and Jewish affairs, Benenson was well equipped to argue for the braided Jewish and Christian religious patrimony of human rights. In his post-conversion writings, he continued to engage respectfully, if selectively, with Jewish thought, positioning himself as a friendly mediator between the two religions.⁸⁸ This Judeo-Christian image readily served as proof of Amnesty’s inclusive cosmopolitanism. A nice Jewish boy turned Christian humanist who openly acknowledged his own “racial” origins, Benenson proposed himself as the physical embodiment of pluralism.⁸⁹

Furthermore, Benenson did not share Malik’s conversionary impulse. Amnesty was not to be “a means of converting others to Catholicism,” he wrote in a letter, explaining that “there are many paths which lead to the same summit.” Yet, “for those of us brought up in the tradition of Western civilization . . . and especially” to those of Jewish origin like himself, Christianity represented the only “discernible and practicable” path to the divine.⁹⁰ In drawing a hard line between his Jewish

⁸⁵ On the dilemmas of “Catholic universalism” in the 1960s, see Piotr H. Kosicki, “The Catholic 1968: Poland, Social Justice, and the Global Cold War,” *Slavic Review* 77 (2018) 638–60.

⁸⁶ Letter from Peter Benenson to Eric Baker, 27 January 1961, IISH, AI 1163.

⁸⁷ Peter Benenson, “Prayers for Human Rights Day” (1962), IISH, AI 1026; idem, “Correspondence with Churches,” *Order of Service* (1964), IISH, AI 1009, “PB II”; idem, “Symbolic Candle of Freedom,” *The Times of London* (9 December 1961) 4.

⁸⁸ Peter Benenson, “Review of *Collaboration with Tyranny in Rabbinic Law*, by David Daube,” *Natural Law Forum* 11 (1966) 135–36; idem, *The Other Face* (Lausanne: Non-Ti-Scordar-Di-Me, 1979) 42, 88, 95.

⁸⁹ Peter Benenson, “Review of *Selected Essays: 1934–1943*, by Simone Weil,” *Blackfriars* 44.513 (March 1963) 136.

⁹⁰ Benenson to Urquhart, 23 October 1962, op. cit.

past and his Christian present, Benenson embraced a supercessionist theology. His view of Christianity's superiority to Judaism left a deep impression on many of his closest friends and colleagues, who professed bafflement at his "Pauline" insistence that "the salvation of the world is entirely Christianity's role."⁹¹ Benenson's Judeo-Christian vision of human rights, then, resisted Jewish difference and questioned Jewish spiritual legitimacy.

This Christianist exceptionalism intensified after the Six-Day War.⁹² As Benenson began to denounce Israel's violation of Palestinian rights in increasingly sharp terms, he doubled down on his call for an "intellectual Christianity" as the sole key to human salvation.⁹³ This tonal shift was on full display in his 1979 book, *The Other Face*, his first human rights manifesto since the "Appeal for Amnesty" issued in 1961.⁹⁴ There, he wrote, the true meaning of Christianity lay not in any faith in the divinity of Jesus or his resurrection. Rejecting heaven and hell, or a "purposeful God," he even dismissed rights as a remedy for human suffering, writing that "those who nobly work to secure freedom for people whose governments unnecessarily regiment them will one day realize that, as with life, not everyone wants an indefinite amount of liberty. Too much freedom of choice can be as debilitating to the intellect as too long a life is to the body."⁹⁵

What really mattered for human happiness was the unceasing "search for acceptance," a lifelong individual drama that began when a baby was separated from its mother. "Acceptance is more important than life," he wrote, "more important than liberty," for it emerged out of the deepest human need for unity. So great was this psychospiritual need that it had sparked the invention of God:

Man begins to be cut off from the rest of the human race at the moment of conception and is completely separated by birth. He is not reunited until he dies. . . . As he cannot possibly see the rest of humanity or properly imagine it, what he tends to do is to personalize, to idealize, it. That idealized person he has traditionally called God.⁹⁶

Citing the French Carmelite prodigy St. Thérèse de l'Enfant Jésus as an inspiration, he outlined his theology of unity:

In the end, there is only one source of appeal which answers the human condition, that is acceptance by the entire race, from which man's body separates him. He needs to be one of the whole, and he cannot be so long as he occupies his mortal frame. The nearest he can get to acceptance by the entire race is to be warmed by "the light of God's countenance" with light and countenance idealized as the conscience of the race. That is why God as

⁹¹ Peter Benenson, interview by Tom Sargant, IISH, AI 991.

⁹² Benenson, interview by Sargant, IISH, AI 991.

⁹³ Benenson, *Other Face*, 66.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, foreword.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, 3.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

concept must be “human,” not some metaphysical, faceless force away in outer space; God is the epitome of man’s conscience.⁹⁷

In the “search for a common conscience to unite mankind,” Benenson still recognized religious pluralism in theory, yet his human rights model erased religion as a viable category of difference, even as it promised “as many Gods as there are people.”⁹⁸ Like other postwar visions of Judeo-Christian universalism, Benenson’s mental universe remained a Christian one, in which Judaism represented a theological helpmate, a partner-faith with which to prove the possibility of pluralism even without challenging the dominance of the Christian spiritual imagination. Judeo-Christian human rights, then, implied the eventual disappearance of the hyphen. When all was said and done, other religions would be included and dissolved within a Christian sphere of Western universalism.⁹⁹

■ The Limits of Dialogue

Two years after Benenson’s failed 1962 approach to Rabbi Yitzhak Nissim, Pope Paul VI visited Israel. That journey represented the first papal visit to the Jewish state, a hugely symbolic act in the context of both post-Holocaust Christian-Jewish relations and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Yet, an unexpected controversy nearly derailed the rapprochement. At the last minute, Rabbi Nissim refused to meet with the pope at his lodgings in Tel Aviv unless the latter first came to visit him in his offices in Jerusalem. It was he who should grant the leader of the Catholic Church an audience, not the other way around.¹⁰⁰ Behind that argument lurked the larger question of interreligious encounter. The Second Vatican Council had raised new prospects for reconciliation between Judaism and Christianity. It had also presented Jews with a challenge. How could one fix the line between ethical cooperation and theological capitulation?¹⁰¹ Was honest interfaith dialogue even possible without compromising core beliefs? Was a papal visit to the sovereign State of Israel a

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 64–70, 73.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁹⁹ On the problematics of the concept of “Judeo-Christian,” see Arthur Cohen, “The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Commentary Magazine*, 1 November 1969, and Shaul Magid, “The Judeo-Christian Tradition,” in *Theologies of American Exceptionalism* (ed. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021), https://publish.iupress.indiana.edu/projects/TAE2019_theologies.

¹⁰⁰ A. Tag, “Spotlight on Personalities,” *Herut* (6 January 1964), 3 (Hebrew); “Rabbi Nissim Stands Firm in His Refusal to Participate in the Welcome Reception,” *Ha-tzofeh* (5 January 1964), 1 (Hebrew). For a contemporary reinterpretation of the controversy, in which the roles are reversed and Pope Paul VI is the party accused of refusing to meet Rabbi Nissim, see Benjamin Glatt, “Pope’s 1964 Holy Land Trip Laid the Foundations for Ties with Israel,” *Jerusalem Post* (4 January 2017), 1.

¹⁰¹ On the larger context of Orthodox Jewish responses to interfaith ecumenicalism, see Yigal Sklarin, “‘Rushing in Where Angels Fear to Tread’: Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rabbinical Council of America, Modern Orthodox Jewry and the Second Vatican Council,” *Modern Judaism* 29 (2009) 351–85, and David Ellenson, “A Jewish Legal Authority Addresses Jewish-Christian Dialogue: Two Responsa of Rabbi Moshe Feinstein,” *American Jewish Archives* 52 (2000) 112–28.

meeting of formal equals, or a bald assertion of the Church's universal claims to theological supremacy in the Middle East and beyond? Could supposedly post-religious projects like international law and human rights ever transcend their Christian theological legacies?¹⁰²

History is not destiny. Religion is never static. Since the 1990s, an ever-expanding number of new religious human rights doctrines and actors have appeared on the global stage.¹⁰³ The three interrelated stories of three mid-century men we have reconstructed here hardly capture this rich diversity.¹⁰⁴ The possibilities for human rights, too, have fundamentally evolved because of changes in global governance, geopolitics, and international law, as well as larger trends in the dynamics of the secular and the sacred in Western society.¹⁰⁵ Most of all, the scale of globalizing religion has parochialized some of these questions, revealing them to be the contingent outgrowths of one passing moment in Western religious history.

Still, the core impulse to religionize human rights in minoritarian, majoritarian, or cosmopolitan terms remains very much with us.¹⁰⁶ We see it in the American and European discourses about international religious freedom and the status of Christianity and Judaism in the Islamic Middle East, as well as in the legal conflicts within Europe over postcolonial legacies of religion and human rights.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰² Emmanuelle Jouannet, *The Liberal-Welfarist Law of Nations: A History of International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 1–27; David Kennedy, “Images of Religion in International Legal Theory,” in *Religion and International Law* (ed. Mark Janis and Carolyn Evans; Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 1999) 145–53; Judith Grbich, “Secrets of the Fetish in International Law’s Messianism,” in *International Law and its Others* (ed. Anne Orford; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 197–220.

¹⁰³ Julia Berger, “Religious Non-governmental Organizations: An Exploratory Analysis,” *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 14 (2003) 15–39; John Boli and David V. Brewington, “Religious Organizations,” in *Religion, Globalization and Culture* (ed. Peter Beyer and Lori Beaman; Leiden: Brill, 2007) 203–31; José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁰⁴ On the complex realities of later Middle Eastern human rights practices, with special reference to Israel and Palestine, see Kurz, *Human Rights and Jewish Internationalism*; Lori Allen, *A History of False Hope: Investigative Commissions in Palestine* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020); and Nicola Perugini and Neve Gordon, *The Human Right to Dominate* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). For general surveys of emerging interrelated trends in scholarship and practice, see *Human Rights Futures* (ed. Stephen Hopgood, Jack Snyder, and Leslie Vinjamuri; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), and James Loeffler and Mila Versteeg, “Foreword: The Future of Human Rights Scholarship,” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 81.4 (2018) i–xi.

¹⁰⁵ Hans Joas, *The Sacredness of the Person: A New Genealogy of Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ Robert Bellah, “The Final Word: Can Christianity Contribute to a Global Civil Religion?” in *Christianity and Human Rights: An Introduction* (ed. John Witte, Jr. and Frank S. Alexander; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 351–66; Elizabeth Castelli, “Theologizing Human Rights: Christian Activism and the Limits of Religious Freedom,” in *Nongovernmental Politics* (ed. Michel Feher with Gaëlle Krikorian and Yates McKee; New York: Zone Books, 2007) 673–87; Pamela Slotte, “The Religious and the Secular in European Human Rights Discourse,” *Finnish Yearbook of International Law* 21 (2020) 231–86.

¹⁰⁷ Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *Beyond Religious Freedom: The New Global Politics of Religion*

In these and other instances, religious diversity is a problem to be solved through proper balancing of minority needs, majority interests, and universal claims. Some contemporary human rights visions seek to neutralize theological difference by speaking of multiple sacred origins and common secular aims. Others consecrate that difference by stressing the variety of sizes, shapes, and diverse needs of religious communities within humanity. Still others seek to sidestep the entire problem by emphasizing universal norms compatible with religious traditions yet delinked from their authority. What all such contemporary models share is an anxious inheritance from that first moment of encounter with the new landscape of nations and states after empire. As we imagine new futures for human rights and religion today, we do well to remember that our own universalisms stem as much from our frames of difference as our aspirations to unity.

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).