

**The Merit of English Section**  
**Senior Division**

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**Book Title** : Religion and Human Rights:  
An Introduction

**Author** : John Witte, Jr. and M. Christian Green

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Throughout history, the role of religion was ever-changing and evolutionary. In contemporary society, religion is beyond a matter of belief; it signifies the interaction between public morals and politics, as well as the connection between consciousness and faith. Nonetheless, religion is facing a multitude of challenges today, the most notably being under the context of human rights.

After the Second World War, the world had just escaped from the grip of Hitler's concentration camps and Stalin's political extremism. Economies were volatile. States were at stake. People's anxiety and worries hit a historic high like never before. It was this scenario that cultivated, that called for, that was in desperate need of one of the biggest breakthroughs in mankind: the adoption of the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 by the United Nations. This had started the second generation of

the pursuit of human rights, which has later become touchy, controversial yet powerful in contemporary society. Nonetheless, while the Declaration and its successive instruments affirmed and were dedicated to the protection of freedom of religion, jihads, genocides and terrorism are still recurring in endless variations around the globe, especially in the Middle East, leading to disputes and casualties. Some believe that while the world is working to ensure the freedom to exercise various religious rights, religion itself is doing the exact opposite, namely the violation of human rights. In another word, it is widely conceived that the sharp contests of religion and human rights have emerged at the same time that human rights norms respecting religion have become increasingly refined.

Are religion and human rights really incompatible?

This is why the book, *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction*, was published: to answer our doubts, especially for those who believe in the healing and spiritual effects of religion and in the meantime, recognize the importance of human dignity and fundamental rights.

Among the equally fascinating chapters, the piece on Confucianism appears to be the most intriguing. Interestingly, Confucianism has never been officially established as a religion, for it doesn't tend to explain the origin of life and the creator of universe, nor does it advocate any form of religious worship. Essentially, Confucius and other sages were not prophets, but thinkers whose legacy explained and interpreted the ancient traditions that they had inherited themselves. Similarly, the *Analects*, unlike the Bible or holy books which provide a

new set of ethics, was pregnant with wishes for an ideal, harmonious and structured society. As for the Way, it referred to a right track and framework that guided behaviors based on social values, instead of a timelessly true document passed from the heaven and under practice *ad infinitum*. Regardless of the distinction between a religion and a stream of thoughts, Confucianism has served a role similar to a religion over time: to influence how one sees the world and responds to things in life.

To many Hong Kong students immersed in the teachings of benevolence (ren) and faithfulness (yi), it is perhaps too clear that Confucianism and fundamental human rights are different in nature. This book challenged this notwithstanding.

Most people, once including myself, thought that ethics of harmonious social relationships had no place for rights that are premised upon individualism and self-assertiveness; Confucianism preached authoritarian morals and politics that were likely to be rejected by a political philosophy of democracy and human rights. John Witte, Jr. and M. Christian Green however, argued that this perception was wrong. Throughout years of listening to lectures about how peasants were supposed to show absolute loyalty to rulers, sons were asked to completely obey the father and women must follow their husbands, many questioned the righteousness of the relationships that Confucianism suggested. It appeared to some that Confucianism's conception of a person was merely role-based in hopes of achieving social harmony, while human rights, on the other hand, stressed the significance of autonomy and freedom in making decisions. This is where Religion and Human

Rights: An Introduction steps in to provide some insights. It is indeed true that Confucianism put great constraints on how one should act, yet it would be problematic to describe it as purely role-based, the book said.

“Confucius golden rule ---- “do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire” from P.92 of Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction.

At the end of the day, our perception on Confucianism seems to be based on a biased characterization of Chinese traditions. Let’s recap the famous story told by Mencius. He held that people had compassion to help others in suffering even if they did not have any personal relationship with them or would not gain actual benefits by doing so, which explained why people would save a toddler from falling into a deep well. This is the best manifestation of how Confucianism, though acknowledging the function of relationships in a harmonious society, indeed reflects upon and judges a doer as an individual separate from a role. In fact, one can easily connect the dots between human rights and Confucianism presented in the book. For instance, Mencius said that it was wrong to “kill an innocent man” or “take what one is not entitled to in order to gain the empire because it violates the principle of righteousness and benevolence”. He also believed in the rulers’ obligations in the fair treatment and allocation of rewards and punishment. This can further consolidate and affirm the two major elements in human rights: the right to life and fairness. In all honesty, Confucianism and human rights are far from fundamentally identical, but it is true that they are compatible.

There are different criteria for what makes a book good. For a novel, an exciting plot will do. For a biography, the credibility of the story will do. As for a unique book that integrates knowledge and a profound analysis, what makes *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction* a must-read is that it does not try to convince readers to think exactly as the authors, but rather, provides some food for thought and perspectives for readers to dig into, especially about issues and questions that challenge the way we think. Reading a book is different from looking up the dictionary: never expect a direct answer to the question. In contrary to that, read, know more, think more, and ultimately, the answer will be clear.

It is often said that books provide inspiration. This book indeed does. It is rooted on religious pluralism. By immersing oneself in this spectacular book, one will learn to understand and appreciate the magnificence of the supernatural, the sophistication of the unbelievable and the power of belief. In fact, religion is an inheritance of human virtues and core values that were developed centuries ago. It motivates people from different backgrounds to behave in the best of human nature and become a better person. It is a ship that sails with the intelligence, compassion and love of mankind, giving epochs of people spiritual support whether in times of comfort, sadness or even wars and tragedies. Now that this book has proved incompatibility between religion and human rights does not exist, the reasons for religious conflicts seemingly fall on the fact that religious pluralism has not been achieved. In human rights context, it is wrong to judge somebody based on their races, wealth or health condition. This also applies to religion. Most religions in the world intend to make this planet a better

place. Thus, regardless of one's personal feelings and thoughts towards a religion, it is crucial to pay respect, accept the difference among human, even though the difference may not be physical.

“(D)eclarations are not deeds,” the United States Judge John T. Noonan, Jr. said. “A form of words by itself secures nothing... (W)ords pregnant with meaning in one cultural context may be entirely barren in another”

This underscores an elementary, yet essential point: human rights need a human rights culture to be effective. It can hardly be denied that documents such as the UDHR have laid foundation for the development and recognition of human dignity, fundamental rights and basic duties. Nonetheless, it takes far more than paperwork to adopt and exercise human rights freely; it at least takes mindsets that can accommodate and respect pluralism.

“Man is by nature a social animal; an individual who is unsocial naturally and not accidentally is either beneath our notice or more than human. Society is something that precedes the individual. Anyone who either cannot lead the common life or is so self-sufficient as not to need to, and therefore does not partake of society, is either a beast or a god,” Aristotle said.

Unlike animals that hide themselves in caves, humans are social creatures that depend on each other mutually. It takes cooperation to build a society and lead a purposeful life. Thus, it is of utmost importance for us to respect the difference in how we perceive the world in general. The moment we all embrace religious pluralism, the moment the

time that human rights and religion truly coincide, as what the writers of *Religion and Human Rights: An Introduction* wished.