

Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship



Introduction to the Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship

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Religious leaders in Africa have had to give a lot of thought to issues of church and state because of the scale and urgency of the crises that have engulfed their societies. Political instability has eroded confidence in public institutions, while corruption and sagging morale have undermined trust and a sense of security. Recent upheavals in Tunisia, Algeria, Egypt, and Libya, where ordinary citizens have risen up and demanded a voice in the government established to rule over them, have given hope to victims of oppression and tyrannical rule in many other parts of the continent. The growing threat to the civil order in general, along with divisions and differences among religious communities themselves, has challenged religious leaders to offer an answer to the mounting crisis.

Religious institutions in Africa lack the resources and the physical assets to make a substantial difference to the material lives and conditions of citizens, and short of abandoning their religious vocation and insinuating themselves into partisan politics, religious leaders often find themselves pushed to the margins where their voice is suppressed or in other ways not heard. Many observers have noted how religious officials have been co-opted for a fee to serve as moral chaplains to those in power, resulting in turning the moral witness of the churches into a mere political gallery. It harms the cause of good governance by dimming hope and giving incentive to arbitrary power. In the long run, the continuing dictatorial abuses will likely spark popular disenchantment and a demand for change.

In many countries religious institutions have often been the only viable structures left in the wake of the collapse of state institutions, including the breakdown of the organs of law and order. Given their endurance and their increasing influence, religious institutions represent an important source of hope in a time of great uncertainty. Accordingly, the willingness of religious leaders to speak to popular despair and to strive in the cause of peace, justice, and reconciliation gives the religious voice an important public role. The choice no longer is between religious anointing of dictatorial power and moral indifference, or between resignation and subjugation, but rather between despair and hope. The fact that government is necessary does not mean that tyranny is inevitable. With democratic safeguards, we can have one without the other. As it is, the present status quo is destructive enough to be no longer tenable.

This is the stark choice facing religious leaders. A growing number of citizens whose lives and living conditions have been adversely affected by tyrannical political regimes and by public malfeasance happen to be self-identified religious persons, whose dual status as citizens and believers means that they do not see a conflict between the allegiance they feel they owe to their coun-

tries and the duty they owe to God and to their fellow human beings. It is not a case of one or the other. Instead, they feel that government should be answerable to the will and consent of citizens while being respectful of the dictates of conscience. The state cannot compel the loyalty and obedience of citizens as the sole justification of its existence, any more than it can compel or forbid love of God and of neighbor. The considerable devotion Africans give to religion while also being actively involved in civic life shows that people take seriously their dual role as citizens and as believers, even though, in their nature, church and state remain separate and distinct institutions.

These facts of political failure and the corresponding growth of religious allegiance have demanded from religious leaders fresh ideas about restoring confidence in the right of citizens to decide their own political destiny, and also about the crucial role of religion as the arrangement believers create to express their duty to God and to their neighbors. Religion and politics overlap to the

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degree that a citizen and a believer are one and the same person, and also to the degree that the will and consent of the citizen rise from the same foundation as the dictates of conscience for the believer. While not all citizens are believers, it is the case that all believers are citizens; and this dual status places on believers a dual obligation to uphold the rule and laws of government and to respect conscience concerning obedience to God.

These reflections form the background to the Accra Charter of Religious Freedom and Citizenship, issued at a meeting of its signatories in Accra, Ghana, February 24–26, 2011. At an important companion conference also convened in Accra, in July 2010, where the subject of Christian-Muslim relations in Africa led to consideration of the Muslim tradition of faith and the public order, there was general recognition of the need to develop from the Christian side a statement on religious freedom and citizenship that would move the debate beyond the current stalemate. The Islamic prescription for the religious reconstruction of society has no exact parallels in Christian Africa, if apartheid South Africa may be considered the exception that proves the rule. The New Testament does not prescribe a blueprint for a religious state, while the experience of the early church points to withdrawal, what Muslims refer to as *hijrah*, rather than to political mobilization, the Muslim *jihad fi sabil li-llahi*, “struggle in the path of God.” Yet Scripture and the experience of the Christian tradition do give us important models of religion and the public order, particularly about how faith invests us with a dual identity as persons created in the image and likeness of God and as subjects of Caesar. The Accra Charter affirms this dual heritage of faith and the cause of the common good as the bulwark against tyranny and hedonism.



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Preamble

We, the signers of this document, met in Accra, Ghana, from February 24 to 26, 2011, to bear witness to our dual citizenship as believers and as members of African societies and nations. We decided to meet and reflect on this dual citizenship at a time when these responsibilities stand out in high relief across this continent. Representing many different Christian traditions, we came from nations such as Côte d'Ivoire, where a civil war threatens and where religious loyalties seem no more united than political ones; from Nigeria, where religious extremists out of several traditions breach the peace, and the government struggles to maintain order; and from the newest nation now emerging, South Sudan, where hopes rise among diverse people of faith for a more just and reconciling public life. None of us was from North Africa, but our hearts and prayers go out to our fellow Africans there, who have taken popular action to reject tyranny and to build better commonwealths.

At the same time, we recognize that governments and societies are provisional arrangements, for by faith we live in our countries while we look "forward to the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:9–10). As Christians we feel a particular burden to put forward a positive vision of how we worship the living God and point the way to God's reign, while giving due regard and respect to the governments under which all people, of all faiths, live together as fellow citizens, and to honor our rulers without ceasing to serve and to fear God (1 Pet. 2:16–17). We are deeply convinced that faith gives its noblest expression in settings where all are free to follow their religious convictions and freely to serve the common good (Gal. 5:13), where government secures the peace and good order taught by all the world's great faiths, and where government affords its citizens the right to live freely and recognizes their power to hold it accountable.

Introduction: Faith, Freedom, and Service

We acknowledge that we are created to live in community, and as such are endowed with rights and responsibilities so that we may enter into a state of society with the purpose of perpetuating life and the flourishing requisite to it. By virtue of the divine sovereignty we live our lives as members of the religious community, while as citizens we conduct our affairs as subjects of the state (1 Pet. 2:13–14).

We wish to emphasize the overlapping obligations of our dual citizenship by drawing attention to the moral basis of our formation in family and community, and to the wider relationships that make for society and the government it creates. In their different ways, divine sovereignty and the sovereignty of the nation-state demand our allegiance without one being exclusive of the other.

On the contrary, the obligations of our membership in the religious community complement and expand the obligations of our role as citizens. Our dual citizenship recognizes the complementarity of our roles as believers and citizens in which freedom becomes the ground of connection between the two. It is the enjoinder of Scripture to honor our rulers and our fellow human beings without ceasing to serve and to fear God (1 Pet. 2:16–17).

In religion, freedom arises from the conscience of the believer, while in the nation-state, freedom springs from the will and consent of citizens. Religious freedom is inseparable from issues of citizenship and government. We are commanded to use our freedom to serve one another (Gal. 5:13).

Born to Believe

When we reflect on who we are and the purpose of our existence, we are constrained to be mindful of the Creator, who is the source of our life and of the freedoms and responsibilities we bear as persons and as a society. The duties and rights we possess arise from the knowledge that we are surrounded by the means God has furnished for our flourishing (Ps. 8:6–8):

- our parents as the channel of life, nurture, and sustenance;
- the heritage of kinship that shapes and grounds us;
- the mother tongue that gives us the words of awareness and identity;
- the societies that give shape and substance to our belonging;
- and the many relationships that bind us to one another, enfolding us in reciprocal rights and duties.

Religion, State, and Society

As persons we learn that membership in the family is consistent and identical with solidarity with our fellow human beings everywhere, that being born in relationship is a stepping stone to growing in relationship and maturing in responsibility. We bring this collective understanding of ourselves into relationships of the wider society, allowing us to share in the privileges and responsibilities of membership of family and kinship, and to submit to a government of laws and regulations providing for our common security and protection. The rule of Scripture that we should care for one another is the cord of Church, society, and state (1 Cor. 12:25–26).

As religious persons we are mindful of the Creator and express that by freely yielding our wills in worship of Him in the same way that we express our sense of common responsibility by banding together freely and necessarily as citizens. The moral constraints to which we are obliged to submit offer the basis for the institution of a government in which life and property are respected, evil is restrained, wrong avenged, and justice upheld so that virtue and enterprise may flourish by individual industry (Prov. 8:15–17; Ps. 128:2).

By the nature of the case, established freely and by common consent, government cannot do more than create the environment for good to flourish; other means are required for the production of the values essential for moral progress (Gal. 5:22–23; Eph. 5:9).

For that purpose believers must abridge their own needs and wants and summon everyone to provide for the necessities of those less fortunate than themselves. By their example they will instill in others the duty "to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). Indeed, government that is instituted as the means of bringing us the blessings of liberty will endure only if it is answerable to the values of the rule of law, justice, equity, mercy, and moderation.

Dual Citizenship, Dual Heritage

The duties, obligations, and privileges of our dual citizenship embrace the following:

- We affirm that the reciprocal relationship of family and kinship—where the moral equality of give-and-take prevails with those we are related to—mirrors the parallel idea of equality of citizenship, where citizenship and freedom are subject to the rule of law (Heb. 13:17).
- Because governments exist by our will and serve our need for public tranquility and an orderly life, we affirm that believers have a moral duty to uphold government and to pray for leaders. Upholding the state is a matter of high moral obligation, and not a matter of political expedience merely (1 Tim. 2:1–2).
- We affirm that citizenship, however, does not exhaust our status as moral persons, because the state cannot be a substitute for the Church as “the edifice of human worth, freedom, and well-being.”
- We affirm that our dual citizenship reflects the complexity of our dual heritage by providing for our common welfare under law in obedience to our common Creator.
- As human persons we acknowledge the Creator as the source of the moral teaching concerning the gift of life, the purpose of our existence, and the worth and destiny of the soul.
- We affirm that citizenship is based on our needs and desires, while our standing as believers is original to our nature and dignity as moral persons.
- We affirm that, tied by the moral cord, citizenship is an idea that draws on our moral affinity with the Creator’s purpose—we are who we are because we bear the image and likeness of the Creator.
- We affirm our dual heritage by acknowledging the two spheres of political sovereignty and divine sovereignty, one delegated to earthly rulers, and the other reserved to God and His ministers.
- We affirm that when obligations of citizenship violate the believer’s conscience, they violate the law of God. We affirm, too, that violations of conscience have a deleterious impact on state and society. When religious freedom is denied, democratic government is weakened and public order undermined.

Liberty, Root and Branch

As a matter of individual conscience and of the common good, we affirm the following:

- We affirm that liberty is at the core of knowledge and worship of God, and at the root of what makes us moral persons fit for society.
- We affirm the fundamental right to choose what religion to follow and to worship God freely and publicly.
- We affirm liberty of person and of property as the foundation of our membership in Church, state, and society.
- We reject the use of coercion and repression in matters of religion, political affiliation, and personal choice.
- We affirm equality of citizens as men and women under the law.
- We affirm the rights of parents in raising their children and guiding them.

- We affirm love of God and of neighbor as the well-spring of civic virtue and the safety net alike of orphan, widow, outcast, and stranger, as well as being the basis of service in Church, state, and society.
- Whether as minorities or as majorities, we abjure the use of the magistrate against one another in matters of conscience (1 Cor. 6:1–6). Rather, we are united in opposing such misuse of power for partisan gain.
- As citizens and believers, we acknowledge that religion as the duty we owe to our Creator as well as the manner of discharging that duty demands the repudiation of force or violence, and the recognition that all citizens are entitled to the free exercise of religion guided by the dictates of conscience (John 4:24). Government may not impose or forbid, favor or impede, the establishment of religion.
- We affirm that our oneness in God is blessed and enriched by our diversity; that we are fellow human beings, even if not of one tribe, ethnicity, race, nationality, creed, or fellowship; and that we are bound to one another in our joys and afflictions, even though our situations and circumstances may be vastly different (Acts 17:24–28).
- We uphold freedom of religion not as an excuse to divide, split, and exploit, but as reason to summon the conscience in the name of the mutual duty of believer and citizen alike to exercise forbearance, charity, and regard for one another (1 Cor. 3:10; 7:21–24; 1 Pet. 3:8–9). In that way the spirit of benevolence can be stirred to move and elevate society in the work of civic righteousness. We are accountable to our Creator and to our fellow human beings for nothing less than that (Phil. 1:9–11).

Temporal and Spiritual

Two worlds are ours, the temporal and the spiritual (Rom. 12:1–2), with a common foundation in the moral obligation of the pursuit of love of God and of neighbor.

Temporal authority vested in government is entitled to our support and prayers as believers. While on our earthly pilgrimage to the City of God in the life beyond this one (Heb. 13:14), our obedience to God requires us in service to others to promote works of civic righteousness.

Perfection in the heavenly realm requires apprenticeship in the earthly realm for formation, mutual forbearance, and mutual cherishing (2 Tim. 2:22; Eph. 4:3). Believers are required to be productive and loyal citizens as a matter of principle, not just for personal political gain, and that example of moral citizenship constitutes an asset for good governance (Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13–14).

Yet we must not forget that the limitations of our finite nature, as well as of natural endowment, offer instructive lessons for the perils of limitless power and of the sin of self-worship (Isa. 13:11; Matt. 20:25–28; Col. 3:12; 1 Pet. 5:5–6; James 4:6). Nations serve God’s purpose in advancing the welfare of the human family, but they can also hinder that purpose when they trample on religious freedom.

To recapitulate:

- We acknowledge the means God provides for our flourishing, including our parents who brought us to life and nurtured and protected us.
- We affirm our brothers and sisters with whom we learned the art of sharing in community, and the love of family that gives solidity to our personality.
- We affirm the idioms of home, school, and neighborhood

that fill our minds with all that belongs early with our knowing and our cherishing.

- We acknowledge the role of the social events of birth, rites of passage and incorporation, marriage, and end of life rituals and anniversaries, as well as the relationships and friendships that sustain us as individuals and as communities.
- We embrace the liberty inscribed in our social and moral nature as constituting the basis of civic righteousness and responsible government.
- We acknowledge the common foundation of freedom in our roles as believers and citizens.
- We affirm our place in the purpose of God for all creation, and our solidarity with our fellow human beings.

- We uphold government under law for the purposes of our common security and protection.
- We embrace the family and the civic virtues of home and society as a foundation of enterprise, community, and the common good.
- We affirm our dual citizenship under God, and the temporal and spiritual privileges and duties that belong with our roots in time and eternity.

We declare and proclaim religious freedom as the charter of citizenship and solidarity in a rapidly changing world of overlapping rights and responsibilities.

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