



FACT SHEET 2:

Human rights origins

“Our contemporary human rights system is heir to demands for human dignity throughout history and across cultures. It expresses the enduring elements of the world’s great philosophies, religions and cultures.”

Boutros Boutros Ghali, former UN Secretary-General

Many principles of international human rights law have their roots in ancient societies and religions.

Confucian thought is based around the teachings of Confucius, an ancient Chinese philosopher. In Confucian belief, individuals in society are dependent on each other and are encouraged to show respect to all. There is a strong degree of family piety and individuals are obliged to contribute towards a harmonious society.

Mo Tzu followed from Confucian thought to propose that justice should be administered in society in a humane way so that the interests of all people are met.

A similar perspective can be found in Islam where people are obliged to provide for Allah, each other and to cultivate well being.

Similarly, Buddhist teachings promote the value of compassion as a means of ending suffering, with a focus on human rights in the next life as well as the present moment.

Codes associated with ancient rulers such as Menes, Hammurabi, Draco, Solon and Manu outline standards of conduct for their societies, which existed within limited territorial jurisdictions. Some of these codes have been interpreted as an acknowledgement of human rights.

In 1200-300 BCE, the scriptures of the ancient Israelites formed the basis of Christian and Muslim thinking. The Ten Commandments outline respect for life and for the property of others. The principle that a person is innocent until proven guilty and the tradition of granting asylum originate in Jewish law.

In 40-100 CE, Christian beliefs taught equality before God. Followers were urged to feed the hungry, clothe the naked and forgive their enemies.

The Greek and Roman empires gave free male citizens certain political rights.

It is therefore important to understand that human rights have originated in many different societies. Their development has occurred through moral and religious codes and though legal frameworks.

Human Rights Explained