



educating for cultural literacy  
and mutual respect

## **Series: Muslim Relations with Other Religious Communities**

This discussion is the first in a series ING is presenting between Muslims and other communities of faith to learn more about each other and foster warmer relations near holidays. Accompanying each event will be lesson plans for educators and community organizations.

**Related subject areas:** Christian-Muslim relations, interreligious studies, religious pluralism, major world religions, religious holidays, interfaith

# Historical Covenants Between Muslims and Christians Discussion and Lesson Plan with Interfaith Panel

### **Islamic Networks Group (ING)**

3031 Tisch Way, 110 Plaza West

San Jose, CA 95128

Phone: 408.296.7312

Website: [www.ing.org](http://www.ing.org)

Facebook: [facebook.com/ing.org](https://facebook.com/ing.org)

Instagram: [Instagram.com/ing\\_org](https://Instagram.com/ing_org)

Twitter: [twitter.com/ing.org](https://twitter.com/ing.org)

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## Introduction

Did you know that the Prophet of Islam established covenants or agreements between his nascent Muslim community and Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities of his time? What do the covenants say? And what does it say about Islam's relationship with other religions?

On Thursday, December 9, 2021, ING held a conversation with John Andrew Morrow, PhD (Muslim), and Sister Marianne Farina, PhD (Christian), on Christmas, Christian-Muslim relations, and the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with Christians.

View the webinar [here](#) to listen to what each speaker said.

## Overview

Christmas is celebrated by Christians and others in the US and around the world. Although it is observed on different dates by various Christian communities, the holiday commemorates the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem near the beginning of the first century. From a Christian perspective, Jesus is the Son of God, while Muslims believe that Jesus is a Prophet of God. Despite these and other differences, there is textual and historical evidence that the first Muslims and their Christian neighbors lived together in peace and harmony.

In seventh-century Arabia, the Prophet Muhammad issued a series of Covenants to Christian communities throughout the Middle East, which guaranteed Christians and Muslims the freedom to practice their respective religions in peace and security. Muhammad granted similar rights to Jews, Zoroastrians, and other religious communities and was an early advocate of religious pluralism. The Quran itself, Islam's holy book, states that "there is no compulsion in religion." (2:256)

The freedom of religion is also a primary right that is included in the US Bill of Rights. There is good evidence that religious liberty and pluralism were also important to early Muslims and other religious communities before the founding of the United States. Education about the religious freedoms granted by the Bill of Rights, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Covenants can help us live together in a multireligious context.

## Notes to Teachers

1. The Winter season is often an opportunity to teach about the holidays, especially Christmas and Hannukah. However, it is also an opportunity to explore historical and contemporary connections between people of different faiths who are often not as well represented in classroom holiday activities and lesson plans. This discussion and lesson plan explores Christmas, Christian-Muslim relations, and the Covenants to enhance religious literacy and representation of Islam and Muslims alongside Christianity and Christians.
2. The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad are a series of documents sent by the Prophet Muhammad (570-632) to Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian communities across the Middle East or Western Asia in the seventh century. These Covenants guaranteed these communities the freedom to practice their respective religions in peace and security, protected their churches, synagogues, and temples, and outlined several other rights and responsibilities. We have provided excerpts from two Covenants between Muslims and Christians in the Appendices below: 1) “The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Coptic Christians” 2) “The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of Persia.” Should you wish to learn more about 17 Covenants between Muslims, Christians, and other religious communities before teaching this lesson, you can access them through *The Covenants of the Prophet Foundation* [website](#). In addition, we have recommended two books for educators on the subject: 1) John Andrew Morrow’s *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World* 2) Craig Considine’s *People of the Book: Prophet Muhammad’s Encounters with Christians*. Please note that the purpose of this lesson is to help students think about the freedom of religion and religious pluralism in history and our own time. As adherents of the two largest world religions, Christians and Muslims together make up 56% of the world’s population. Exploring their shared history and concerns about religious freedom may help us live together today in peace and with mutual respect.
3. This may also be an opportunity for students to review or explore the connections between religious freedoms found in religion with religious freedoms contained in secular documents such as the [US Bill of Rights](#) and the [UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). Together these documents may help students learn about and appreciate the freedom of religion and religious pluralism in our own context.

## Guiding Questions referencing the speakers' words and related documents

1. **What is the significance of Christmas for Dr. Farina? What is the significance of Christmas for you?**

Dr. Farina (3:32-4:41): “Yes, this is indeed what we might call the Advent Christmas Season that we are in right now as Christians. We call this the Advent Season, the coming season, because it is a time for us, four weeks of preparation before Christmas, which we celebrate on December 25<sup>th</sup>. And during this time, we direct our hearts to focus on Jesus’ Second Coming as he had predicated in the Gospels and to celebrate Christ’s birth among us, God among us, that is also recorded in the Gospels. From the earliest times of the Church, people have been fascinated about Jesus’ promise to come back, but in this time the scripture readings of Advent remind us not to worry so much about the Second Coming as we should with our own preparation, to be prepared with Christ’s coming and to think about ways that God will come among us in a new way in our own hearts and in our community.”

2. **As a Muslim American, Dr. Morrow discusses how his views on Christmas changed, which he attributes to his own growth and understanding of history and the texts he cites. What does this tell us about religion and its interpretation?**

**Reference document:** [Rivers of Faith | The Pluralism Project](#)

Dr. Morrow (7:31-10:06): “Growing up as a Muslim teenager, I was taught that celebrating the birth of Christ was a prohibited innovation. I was taught that it was forbidden to wish someone a merry Christmas and that, while I could accept gifts from Christians, I could by no means offer them gifts in return. They I grew up and grew a brain. Almighty God, in the Glorious Quran, celebrates the birth of Christ, the Messiah, and honors the Virgin Mary, the only woman named in the Quran and to whom a chapter is devoted, as ‘purified and chosen above the women of the worlds,’ so says Quran 3:42.

When the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, reconquered the city of Mecca and purged the Ka’bah of its idols, it is reported by Ibn Ishaq, Waqidi, and Azraqi, that he protected a portrait of Mary and Jesus with his hand and refused to remove it, deface it, or destroy it. He honored the signs of God out of piety, as per Quran 22:32. The early followers of Islam, who identified themselves as *mu’minin* or “believers” and only much later as *muslimin* or “Muslims,” prayed in churches, performed pilgrimages to Jewish and Christian holy sites, endowed monasteries, and celebrated Christmas and Easter. In the Muslim East, such celebrations continued for over half a millennium. In the Muslim West, the celebration of Christmas and Easter continued for over a thousand years, until they were prohibited and replaced with Milad al-Nabi, the birth of the Prophet, peace be upon him. According to several academics, including Christoph Luxenberg, Guillaume Dye, and Gabriel Said Reynolds, *Surah 97, al-Qadr*, appears to refer to the birth of Christ. It bears striking similarity to Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus in 2:13-14. The parallels between *Surah 97* and *The Hymn of the Nativity* of Saint Ephrem, who died in the fourth century, are massive. If the Quran is indeed drawing from Christian imagery of the birth of Christ, then I can say with Islamic confidence, merry Christmas to you.”

3. **According to Dr. Morrow, what are the Covenants that the Prophet Muhammad sent to Christians? And why haven't most people heard about them before now? What rights do they give to Christians and people of other faiths?**

**Reference document:** [A Closer Look at the Prophetic Covenants](#)

Dr. Morrow (10:39-13:54): “The Covenants are promises that the Prophet Muhammad made with the Christians of his time and all times to come, granting them rights and privileges that are not to be infringed upon. He protected the Christians of Najran, the Sinai, Jerusalem, Syria, Armenia, and the Christians of the world. They were granted the protection of God, His Prophet, his family, his successors, and those vested with authority until the coming of the hour of judgment. They were guaranteed freedom of religion, association, and organization, as well as non-interference in ecclesiastical affairs. Conversion by coercion was prohibited. The religious institutions were granted tax-free status. They were to be protected, maintained, and rebuilt. They were permitted to ring their church bells, organize religious processions, and bury their dead according to their customs. They were to be treated as the flock of the Prophet and protected. Protected why? Because God protects, ‘Monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of God is much mentioned,’ as per Quran 22:40. They are not to be pulled down. As the Quran repeats over and over again, ‘God is worthy of all praise.’ More than anyone, he understood that nobody had a monopoly on truth. The Quran itself repeats time and again, that the message that Muhammad was bringing was not new. He was renewing and reviving a universal religious and spiritual tradition. He could see beyond outer forms and perceive inner truth. In fact, the Quran calls upon believers to accept previous prophets and scriptures. The Quran also promises salvation to other faith communities. As we read in 2:63, ‘Surely, those who believe and those who are Jews and the Christians and the Sabians, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.’ The Quran calls upon believers to ‘Come to a common word,’ as per 3:64, to find common ground, to believe in God and to be good. The Golden Rule summarizes the Law of God: ‘Do unto others and you would have them do unto you.’ The rest is commentary. The Covenants of the Prophet are not new. They are as old as Islam and as old as the Quran. In fact, the Quran refers to them on numerous occasions, including the Covenant of Medina and the Covenant of Najran. As I’ve established in my books, *Islam and the People of the Book* and *The Messenger of Mercy*, the Covenants of the Prophet were familiar to Muslims from the dawn of Islam to the fall of the Ottoman Empire. Although some scholars and leaders always maintained their memory, they fell out of the collective consciousness of most Muslims, due to factors both external and internal: colonization and radicalization.”

4. **How does Dr. Farina define the word “covenant”? What is the difference between how Christians generally understand the word and how it is used in the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad sent to Christians? Is the word “covenant” used the same or differently? And how?**

Dr. Farina (14:28-16:38): “I would like to respond first by talking a little bit about the word ‘covenant’ and how it’s understood from the Christian perspective and then in terms of this particular discover that Dr. Morrow has brought forward for us to contemplate and to reflect upon. Though the word ‘covenant’ is not specifically in the Christian Bible as we understand it, the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament, the meaning of it is really in the

relationship of those entering this arrangement. In religion, a covenant is a formal alliance, or an agreement made by God with a religious community or humanity in general. The concept, central to the Abrahamic traditions, is revealed in the various biblical covenants, the Covenant of Noah, of Abraham, of Moses, or David, and culminating in the New Covenant with Jesus. From God's promises to save all creation in Noah to God's presence among us to lead us by example and grace with Christ, we see the fulfillment of these promises of God to all humankind. We also reflect on the spirituality of the covenant. It differs from a contract. A contract has terms and conditions. Though there are stipulations also in the sacred agreements, it's not quite the same. It is the human dimension in these particular covenants that we recognize that could fall short, but not fall short on God's part. In the Bible we see that a covenant is for life, it is not temporary. A contract is written on paper; a covenant is written on our hearts. Covenants that God makes with us require a contribution of 100%, not 50% God, 50% humankind. 100% God, 100% humankind. That is the depth of the commitment that we see in the spirituality of the covenant. In a covenant, you give your life."

5. **What is Dr. Farina's understanding of the Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with Christians? How does her understanding compare to Dr. Morrow's and what the documents state? Are they the same or different? And how?**

Dr. Farina (16:39-18:53): "This is what I see as so remarkable in the Covenants, that Dr. Morrow has shared with us and has revealed to us, with the Prophet Muhammad and the Christian communities. I think it's in that spirituality that these Covenants were struck between the communities. The agreement is not about striking a bargain necessarily, but a set of promises to the other that emerges from the person's commitment to God, who they are, called by God in relation to God and others. For example, to guarantee that no Christian will be made Muslim by force is founded upon a Muslim understanding that faith is a free choice. God offers the gift of faith to all people. We accept this gift by having faith and trust in God. To pledge freedom to worship as one pleases brings to mind the Muslim insight that all human beings, all creation, are called to respond to God, to have God-consciousness (*taqwa*). To promise to protect sacred places emerges from a Muslim's belief that God has gifted us with the opportunity to create the places and the spaces with which we can encounter the sacred. God is with us, 'closer to us than our jugular vein' as the Quran says. (50:16) To protect and even fight for Christians wrongly persecuted is founded on a commitment to justice for all people, *'adl* as is understood in the Muslim community. And as I look at the Covenants and as Christians respond to the Covenants, I think we are called to a common response, a common call to be vicegerents for all of creation, the protections and the promises that we make for all creations. And the Covenants of Muhammad point to this attentiveness [to] the ecologies of existence. Maybe we could say that the Prophet Muhammad was a prophet for social and environmental ecology. And I think we as Christians can respond by agreeing [with] and supporting these commitments together."

6. **Both Dr. Farina and Dr. Morrow were asked, "What practical steps can be taken by Muslims and Christians today to abide by the Covenants as individuals and communities?" What do they recommend? And how do you think we might engage with people of different religious backgrounds?**

Dr. Morrow (19:24-20:45): “Break bread. You can’t honor your neighbor unless you know your neighbor. It’s hard to hate someone you have a relationship with. If you humanize yourself, it becomes difficult for others to dehumanize you. As fundamentally flawed [as] he was, Anthony Bourdain, may God have mercy upon his soul, was a human being with a huge heart. He was perfectly imperfect. As much as he struggled with his shyness, self-esteem, and insecurities, he had the courage, humility, and goodwill to reach out to others and make meaningful human connections. If he could do it, we [can] do it and we should do it. Build relationships. Build communities. Move from extremes to the middle ground. God is beautiful and loves beauty. Show your beauty, the image of God in which you were created. Let your spirit shine. God is merciful and loving, says the Quran 11:90. He has placed love and mercy in our hearts, as per 30:21. So let us love God and love God’s creation. For He is One and we are one.”

Dr. Farina (21:38-23:43): “One of the practical steps for us is to really study the Covenants together. I think we have seen some precedent with “A Common Word” project that began in 2007. I think we see this with Shaykh Bin Bayyah’s Forums for Peace that he began in Abu Dhabi about eight years ago. So, there is I think precedent for us, Muslims and Christians, to come together and to study the spirituality, as well as the content of the Covenants. I think it would be wonderful for us to formally have conferences, get colleges involved in the actual study of the material together. I’d like to see women and youth involved in sharing in these forums and participating in the circles...Maybe college and high school courses on the Covenants? What do you think, Zachary? Maybe an ING study project that could be shared among the different high schools? Let us publish articles and books on the Covenants. Let us develop a bibliography history on these Covenants. There is a wonderful history of Christian-Muslim relations that Brill has published, I think it’s up to its 15<sup>th</sup> edition, of the way Muslims and Christians have interacted, have shared documents, have signed agreements and treaties, and have fostered letters together, back and forth, with certain sets of conditions and promises that we made to one another. Let’s bring that rich history forward. Let us be able to do that in a way that will give people the kind of information that they need, so that what they see on the front page, which is alarmist and perhaps extremist and very shallow in understanding, let them be able to respond with a deeper knowledge of Christian-Muslim relations and the histories that we do share together.”

7. **How do the Covenants compare with religious freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? Could we say that Muslims developed one of the first Bill of Rights? Do you agree or disagree with the speaker’s answer?**

**Reference documents:** [The US Bill of Rights](#)  
[The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)  
[A Closer Look at the Prophetic Covenants](#)

Dr. Farina (24:32-26:57): “Yes, I would agree in the sense that you definitely see the foundation for this spirit of genuine cooperation and collaboration built on the conviction that each person possesses inherent dignity, which is given to them by God. You certainly do see this in these Covenants that have been established. You also recognize that within these Covenants you see the beginnings of the notion that we must secure together the

common good, a commitment to justice, securing the needs for persons and communities to realize the goodness in this world and the next to which God calls them. There is also a substantial understanding of freedom. What you might say you see in the content of these Covenants that it's not just freedom to be left alone, but freedom to engage, to be involved in the kind of excellence to which we're called to be as persons and communities as God intends. And this is certainly true when we look at the Bill of Rights, they are not just about rights, nor are the Universal Declaration of Human Rights just about rights, it's also about a set of duties. How do we protect, how do we fulfill the rights of others? And certainly, you see this in the details of the Covenants of the Prophet. But there is difference too though because modern political agreements are more like contracts that we pledge and bind ourselves to legally. And we often focus on negative rights, not necessarily on positive rights. What are the responsibilities that we will provide? I think what we see here in the Covenants of the Prophet [are] more robust, positive rights, what it is that we will do, what it is that we will promise, and the protections and the responsibilities that we will take to be sure that those protections as well as those needs are fulfilled. So, I think in many ways the spirit is there from the very beginnings of the Prophet Muhammad, but I also think there's a line running through it as a corrective to all of the other types of political agreements that we come into in the sense of not just negative rights, but also positive rights."

**8. Do the Covenants have broader implications beyond Christian-Muslim relations? What other religious communities were guaranteed rights by the Prophet Muhammad?**

Dr. Morrow (27:39-29:05): "The Prophet protected Christians. Yes, indeed. Both unitarian and trinitarian. That included those that followed the Jewish Law and those who believed it had been abolished. While he may not have agreed with the Christology of certain Christians, and even Christians are divided over the nature of Christ, he acknowledged that they were monotheists, not polytheists and idolaters as certain Muslim extremists would have us believe. And while the Prophet did not agree with Jewish rabbis on all religious matters, and the Jews themselves are divided into different groups, he recognized that they were monotheists who believed in the preceding prophets and strived to follow the Law of Moses. The differences were in the details. In the same way that he protected Christians, he protected Jewish people. Medina itself was a Judeo-Muslim community bound by a Covenant and Constitution. As the document itself establishes, 'The Jews and the believers consisted of one community.' That was not the end of the story, however. The Prophet also granted covenants of protection to the Yemenite Jews, the Jews of Khaybar, and the Jews of Maqna on the coast of the Gulf of Aqaba. This policy of building an alliance between believers was a constant throughout the mission of Muhammad, from his time in Mecca to his last days in Medina."



## Writing Activities

1. Read and analyze “The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Coptic Christians” and “The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of Persia” below. Compare and contrast the rights granted in the two texts. What additional rights are guaranteed to Christians in “The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of Persia”?
2. If you were tasked with writing a document on human rights, what 10 rights would you include?

## Appendices

### 1. “The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Coptic Christians”

*“The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Coptic Christians” was brought to light by Georg Graf in 1914. The copy of the covenant he rediscovered appears to date from the 1800s; however, it was said to have been copied from the original. In it, Muhammad professes the following:*

“This is my Covenant to all the protected Christians, and with all the places where they live, so that they may be protected by us for the sake of God, the Most-High. They are God’s trusted subjects on His earth. They preserve what He revealed to them in the Gospel, in the Psalms, and in the Torah. Before God, the Most-High, they have nothing that angers Him or gives Him cause to accuse them...The Christians shall be safe in all their affairs from the rising of the sun until its setting and from the north to the south. He gave this commandment to them out of fairness on his part and upon the command of God, the Most-High...

I will protect them wherever they may be... I personally take them under my protection and the protection of my followers, the sons of Ishmael, who must guard and watch over them. I will always keep all harm and violence away from them and will keep every person away from them who is their enemy and causes them harm. I will lead them personally and with the help of my followers, my helpers, and with the family of my religion, the Muslims, for they are God’s flock and my flock.

I also command the government and its leaders, the jurists and religious scholars, to not treat them harshly. I will keep all violence and all evil away from them. Such violence will not happen to them from the family of my religion and my community. I will see that they are honored in all cities and villages. They will be scribes and trusted advisers of those in power and kings, appointed governors, and all the judges of the earth. The monks and priests shall not owe any taxes. Their monasteries, churches, and property will always be free of taxation. None of their patriarchs and none of their bishops will be removed from their positions and places. They shall be honored. Their laws and customs shall not be abolished, and you will not cause them and their churches any problems.

A Christian may not be prevented from practicing his religion. It is not permitted to destroy their houses of worship. This is not what God commands. Every creature of God hopes for leniency from the Lord. It is not permitted to remove anything from the homes of the Christians to take to your homes. It is not permitted to enter the homes of Christians without permission...Nothing will be removed from their places of worship or from their churches. If any of their places of worship are destroyed, they will be rebuilt as they originally were.

No crime, accusation or sin shall be directed towards them...I command you not to harass the Christians...Muslims should not intervene between two Christians...in order to favor one over the other. They can only intervene to promote reconciliation between them, to encourage mutual good-will and friendship, to prevent conflict, and to prevent the use of weapons...No Muslims shall deceive a Christian out of hatred in order to commit an injustice. Do not adorn yourselves with their possessions by force! Do not respond to them other than in the kindest manner! Take them under your wing and keep all harm and every act of violence away from them, wherever they are and wherever they stay. If one of you wrongs a Christian, then the Christian will receive support from my people against the danger threatening him.

Do not be hostile towards them. Do not abandon them. Do not lead them to destruction. Truly, we have given them what they deserve. You must remove from them every act of violence that strikes them. Be their helpers in the affairs of the world...Whenever the Christians need one of

you, then you shall grant them your support and provide him with assistance in any matter that concerns their welfare. The Muslims must help them. None of you can hate, oppress or despise them. Whoever does so, hates God and hates me and is excluded from our mercy until he respects the commands of this covenant that we have made with the religion of the protected Christians. None of you may hate or assault them.

Do not set foot in the houses of worship, churches, and monasteries. Do not make their worship and prayers impossible for these are commanded, in truth, in the revealed books...The monks and priests are to be sincerely honored by you. Treat them in a friendly manner, wherever they may be. Do not turn them over to their enemies. Do not use violence to force them to abandon their religion. They must be protected for the sake of God, the Most-High, the Mighty, and the Wise, out of goodness and kindness. The monks and priests have a covenant of protection that I have given them. No evil or injustice will touch them, wherever they are, and wherever they reside, in cities or villages, so long as we and all Muslims have power over them. We must guarantee their protection. We must be lenient, kind, merciful, helpful, and protective... until the end of this world and the coming of the Hereafter on the Day of Resurrection.

None of my people will prevent the Christians from beating their clappers. They were already beaten on the ship of our lord, Noah, may peace be upon him.”

## 2. “The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of Persia”

*“The Covenant of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of Persia” was discovered in the Cathedral of New Julfa, in Isfahan, by Leon Arpee, an Armenian American scholar, during the first half of the twentieth century. The manuscript itself indicated that it had been authenticated by Ja’far al-Sadiq who had compared it to a copy of the same document which was in the possession of his family. It reads:*

“By the will of God! In the Name of God Merciful! This covenant must be obeyed by all the Christian nations throughout the world.... Muslims must obey this covenant...Muslim believers must defend and help Christian believers wherever they are, whether they are close or far, throughout the Christian world.

They must protect their places of worship and the monks and priests that live there...The Muslim believers must leave the religious buildings of the Christian believers alone...Christian priests must not be prevented from doing their duties...They must not be persecuted because of their beliefs and practices...They must be allowed to pray as they wish in their places of worship and according to their religion...Their churches cannot be torn down or destroyed...

Christians shall not be asked to fight for Muslims against the enemies of the Faith...Christians will not be forced to accept Islam...Muslims will treat Christians with mercy and kindness and protect them from oppressors...If a Christian woman marries a Muslim man, she will be allowed to keep her Christian faith, attend Christian churches freely, and practice her religion with liberty...

Since the Christians have submitted to us, and asked for our protection and refuge, it is legitimate to offer them all forms of help...”

Source: *The Covenants of the Prophet Foundation*: <https://covenantsoftheprophet.org/lesson-2/>



## Books and Websites

1. John Andrew Morrow, *The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of the World* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press/Sophia Perennis, 2013).
2. Craig Considine, *People of the Book: Prophet Muhammad's Encounters with Christians* (London: C. Hurst & Co. Ltd., 2021).
3. *The Covenants of the Prophet Foundation*: <https://covenantsoftheprophet.org>
4. *The US Bill of Right: First 10 Amendments to the Constitution*: <https://www.aclu.org/united-states-bill-rights-first-10-amendments-constitution>
5. *The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights*: <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>