

Peter Zoehrer
September 9, 2026

Moral Disarmament

Aaron Rhodes and the capture of human rights by states that do not believe in them

PETER ZOEHRER
SEP 9





REA
D IN
APP
↗



The Human Rights Council in session at the Palais des Nations, Geneva. The room was built to look like a court of conscience. Membership is allotted by regional blocs; China and Cuba sit through 2026. In October 2022 the Council voted 19–17–11 not to debate its own High Commissioner’s report on Xinjiang. Photo: UN Photo / Palais des Nations, Human Rights Council chamber.

“Ideas that emerged in and defined the West became the means of its own moral disarmament.”
— A. Wess Mitchell

This essay is a reading of Aaron Rhodes’s latest book, *Human Rights Without Illusions: Escaping the Moral Trap of Universalism* (Academica Press, 2025)—and an argument for why it deserves to be read. Rhodes does not offer another memoir from the corridors of Geneva. He offers a diagnosis: the postwar human-rights system has been captured by states that do not believe in human rights—and the West itself supplied them with the vocabulary to subvert them.

There is a peculiar kind of bad faith that has captured the language of human rights. It speaks constantly of universality, inclusion, and the international community, while looking away from the prisoner of conscience, the banned congregation, the journalist in a cage. It treats consensus among governments as a measure of morality. It confuses a resolution with justice.

This Substack is reader-supported. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.

Upgrade to paid

The postwar human-rights system has been captured by states that do not believe in human rights—and the West itself supplied them the vocabulary.



Dr. Aaron RHODES at the **OSCE** Conference in Warsaw delivering his keynote speech to 57 government delegations and over 300 NGO representatives as executive director of the **International Helsinki Federation** (IHF). (Photo: FOREF)

Aaron Rhodes has spent his life refusing that confusion. As Executive Director of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights from 1993 to 2007, co-founder of the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran and the Freedom Rights Project, and President of the Forum for Religious Freedom–Europe from 2014 to 2025, he has stood with dissidents in the Balkans, Chechnya, Central Asia, Iran, and beyond. Austria made him an honorary citizen for that work. The University of Chicago called him “one of the leading human rights activists in the world.” He is not a theorist who discovered tyranny in a seminar. He is a witness who returned to the sources to understand how the West’s greatest political inheritance was turned against itself.

His new book, *Human Rights Without Illusions: Escaping the Moral Trap of Universalism* (Academica Press, 2025), is the fruit of that double life. It is short, severe, and necessary. It should be read by anyone who still believes that freedom of religion, speech, association, and conscience are not bargaining chips in a global moral parliament.

The moral trap

Rhodes’s thesis is unfashionable and therefore clarifying. The modern international human rights system, inaugurated by the Universal Declaration of 1948, did not simply implement natural rights. It recast them as the product of intergovernmental consensus and bureaucratic cooperation. It drew on older dreams of a morally unified humanity—Hellenistic Stoicism, medieval Christendom, a secularized law of nations—and fused them with political progressivism. The result was a project of moral transformation from the top down: rights as what states can be induced to declare together, rather than what human beings already possess by nature.

That is the illusion.

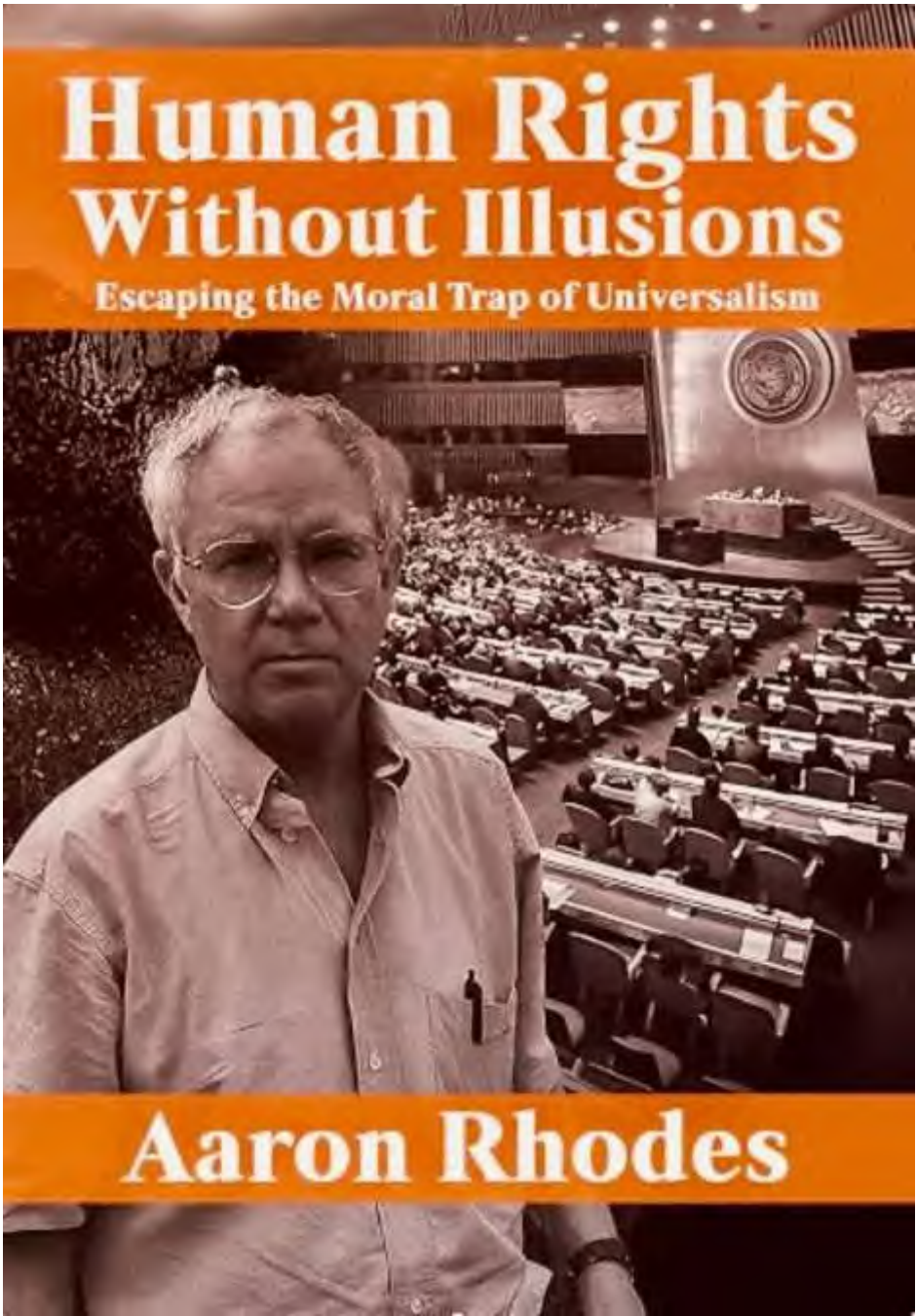
Rights as what states can be induced to declare together, rather than what human beings already possess by nature.

Natural rights, as the American Founders understood them, rest on a different universalism: a common human nature, accessible to reason, prior to the state. Governments exist to secure those rights, not to mint new ones through negotiation. Interactions among sovereigns occur, as Hobbes and Locke saw, in a condition without a common judge. Rights, therefore, can ultimately be protected only where civil society has law that can actually be enforced—inside states. The United Nations cannot be that judge. Pretending it can is not idealism. It is moral disarmament.

Pretending it can is not idealism. It is moral disarmament.

Rhodes is careful. Defending human rights is a moral duty. But advocacy that submits freedom to “inclusive” institutions containing some of the world’s worst oppressors will inevitably be corrupted. Consensus becomes the price of principle. Authoritarian states learn the game. They sit on human rights councils, lecture liberal societies, and treat genuine liberties as one item among many—to be balanced against development, “living together,” or the feelings of the majority.

The record of the last decade is not a footnote to that argument. It is the argument in numbers.



Aaron Rhodes, *Human Rights Without Illusions: Escaping the Moral Trap of Universalism* (Academica Press, 2025). The author stands outside the hall; the book is about what happens inside it. Available from Academica Press and major booksellers.

Geneva as a stage for the jailer

The UN Human Rights Council has 47 members, allocated by regional blocs. It is not a court of virtue. It is a diplomatic club. China and Cuba sit on it through 2026. In recent cycles the roster has also included Qatar, Kuwait, Burundi, Vietnam, Pakistan, Egypt, and, in earlier years, Sudan, Venezuela, and Russia—until Moscow was suspended after Bucha.

On 31 August 2022, on the last day of Michelle Bachelet’s term as High Commissioner, her office released an assessment of Xinjiang. It documented arbitrary and discriminatory detention of Uyghurs and other Muslim groups on a scale that “may constitute... crimes against humanity,” along with torture, sexual violence, and family separation. On 6 October 2022, the Council was asked merely to *debate* that report. The vote was 19 against, 17 in favor, with 11 abstentions.

The UN’s own human-rights office finds possible crimes against humanity. The UN’s human-rights council declines even to discuss them.

The debate never happened. Among the “no” votes were China and a cluster of Belt-and-Road partners; among Muslim-majority members of the Council, Somalia was the rare exception that voted yes. The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, so vocal on other files, did not rally to the Uyghurs.

That is institutionalized universalism in practice: the UN’s own human-rights office finds possible crimes against humanity; the UN’s human-rights council declines even to discuss them.

Beijing did not stop at blocking scrutiny. It has used the same Council to export an alternative vocabulary—“mutually beneficial cooperation,” sovereignty, non-interference, the primacy of economic and social rights—jointly promoted with Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela. The point is not development. The point is to drain attention from civil and political liberty, the one category of rights the Chinese Communist Party cannot survive if taken seriously.

Falun Gong, the Cross, and Tibet

Xinjiang is not an isolated file. It is the most visible panel in a single policy: the Party as the only permitted source of meaning.

The Party as the only permitted source of meaning.

Falun Gong has been hunted since Jiang Zemin’s campaign began in July 1999. Practitioner networks document thousands of deaths in custody over a quarter-century; the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom still records elderly practitioners sentenced and dying in prison in 2025, while the Congressional-Executive Commission on China lists Falun Gong among the largest groups of religious prisoners in its database. The campaign has gone transnational: surveys of practitioners in the United States report hundreds of cases of harassment, threats, and pressure on relatives in China. The UN

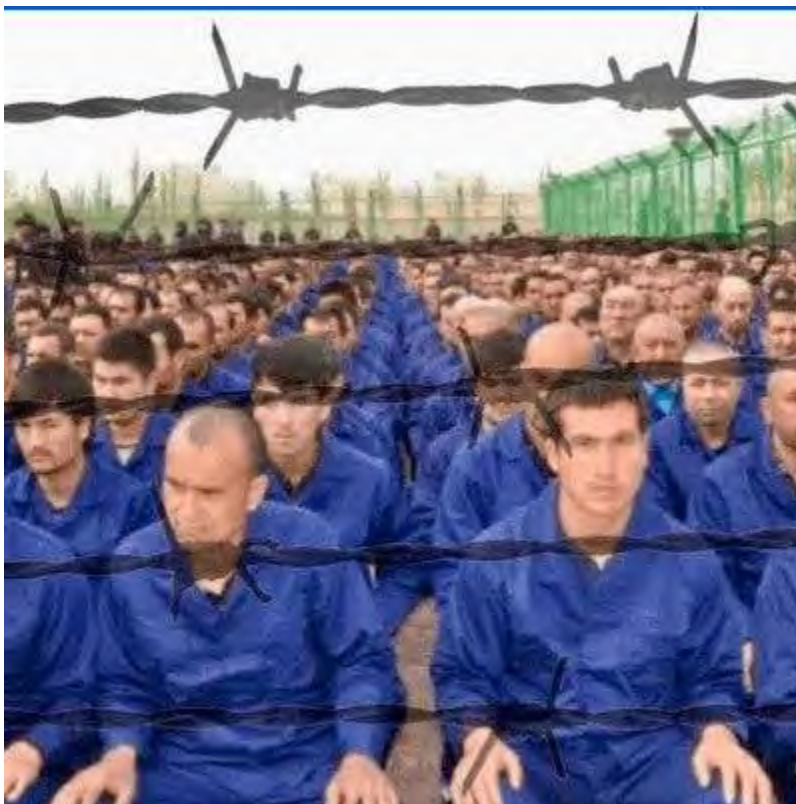
system has never treated this as it treats a fashionable country-specific resolution. A meditation school was declared an enemy of the state. The vocabulary of “cult” did the rest.



Falun Gong practitioners at the National Mall in Washington, 20 July 2023. Here they may stand in silence. In China, Jiang Zemin’s campaign has treated the same exercises as a crime since July 1999; USCIRF and the CECC still list practitioners among the country’s largest groups of religious prisoners. The UN has never given this file the machinery it reserves for fashionable targets. Samira Bouaou / The Epoch Times.

Christians were supposed to be the exception that proved engagement works. They were not. Under Xi Jinping’s “Sinicization,” churches are expected to preach the Party. Crosses have been torn down; unofficial congregations raided; children barred from services; sermons aligned with Xi Jinping Thought. Catholics were offered a special bargain. The 2018 Holy See–Beijing provisional agreement on bishops, renewed and now running through 2028, was sold as a way to heal the split between the Patriotic Association and the underground Church. Human Rights Watch and the Hudson Institute have documented the opposite: underground bishops and priests pressured, detained, disappeared, or placed under house arrest so that communities will join the state church. Nina Shea has named ten Vatican-approved bishops still persecuted after the deal. James Su Zhimin has been missing for decades. The agreement gave Beijing a talking point in Rome and a lever against those who would not register. It did not give Chinese Catholics the first freedom.

Tibet is the long experiment in erasing a people without always needing camps. UN human-rights experts have warned that on the order of a million Tibetan children have been placed in state boarding schools where Mandarin dominates, Tibetan is marginalized, and the curriculum is built around Han experience and Party loyalty—children as young as four taken from homes and monasteries. Private Tibetan schools have been shuttered. Temple rules revised in 2025 further subordinate Tibetan Buddhism to CCP leadership and “core socialist values.” Gedhun Choekyi Nyima, recognized by the Dalai Lama as the 11th Panchen Lama, has been missing since 1995. This is what “cultural genocide” looks like when it is patient: not only the destruction of statues, but the manufacture of a generation that cannot speak easily with its grandparents.



Xinjiang, as the world was shown it—and as Geneva declined to put on the agenda.

None of this has produced a Xinjiang-style OHCHR country assessment followed by a Council debate—because the Council already failed that test, and because China’s allies treat these files as interference. The same states that cannot find their voice for Uyghurs, Falun Gong, underground Catholics, or Tibetan children find it instantly when the target is Israel.

The same states that cannot find their voice for Uyghurs, Falun Gong, underground Catholics, or Tibetan children find it instantly when the target is Israel.

Protecting human rights is possible only in nation-states, where the rules of civil society are legally enforceable.

Russia, Memorial, and the vocabulary of “denazification”

On 28 December 2021, Russia’s Supreme Court ordered the liquidation of Memorial, the country’s most important historical-research and human-rights organization, on “foreign agent” grounds. Weeks later, on 24 February 2022, Russian forces invaded Ukraine. On 7 April 2022, after images from Bucha, the General Assembly suspended Russia from the Human Rights Council: 93 in favor, 24 against, 58 abstentions. China voted no, alongside Belarus, Cuba, Iran, North Korea, Syria, and others. Russia announced it was quitting. It later tried to return; in October 2023 that bid failed.

The episode is often cited as proof that the system “works.”

Selectivity is not a glitch. It is what happens when rights are treated as the output of voting blocs rather than as constraints on power.

Rhodes’s framework suggests a colder reading. The Council could act when a permanent member’s war produced images the cameras could not ignore. It could not act, a few months later, on a UN report about mass internment in Xinjiang. Selectivity is not a glitch. It is what happens when rights are treated as the output of voting blocs rather than as constraints on power.

Moscow, meanwhile, has not abandoned the language of rights. It has inverted it. Annual resolutions on the “glorification of Nazism” become a pretext for the claim that the war in Ukraine is “denazification.”

Occupied territories are described as liberated. Independent monitors are “foreign agents.” The words remain. Their meaning is confiscated.

The words remain. Their meaning is confiscated.

Islamist states and the hierarchy of victims

The same machinery produces a second distortion: a hierarchy of victims so lopsided that it ceases to be a standard.

UN Watch’s compilation of General Assembly condemnatory resolutions from 2015 through 2025 is brutal in its simplicity: on the order of 173 resolutions targeting Israel; nine on Iran; ten on North Korea; twelve on Syria; zero on China; zero on Cuba.

173 resolutions targeting Israel. Zero on China. Zero on Cuba.

The Human Rights Council has, since 2006, maintained a unique standing agenda item—Item 7—devoted solely to Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. No other country on earth has that honor. **In a single March session, UN Watch counted four condemnatory resolutions on Israel and none on China, Cuba, Qatar, or Pakistan.**



Aaron Rhodes speaking in Geneva, 25 September 2024, at a special briefing on the sidelines of the 57th session of the UN Human Rights Council (Restaurant Vieux-Bois). Then President of FOREF Europe, he was addressing serious human-rights concerns for minority faith communities in Japan—the same independence from official consensus that runs through *Human Rights Without Illusions*.*Photo: FOREF Europe.*

After Hamas’s massacre of 7 October 2023—civilians, families, the elderly, children—the Council and its orbit did not first ask how a theocratic militia that embeds among civilians and proclaims the destruction of a neighboring people can be treated as a human-rights interlocutor. It reached, with familiar speed, for the vocabulary of occupation, proportionality, and “root causes.” Rhodes notes that the war “brought into focus the contradictions that paralyse global human rights institutions.” The paralysis is not accidental. **When universality is defined as consensus among states, the states that**

treat Jews, apostates, Baha’is, Ahmadiyya, Christians, and women as lesser persons get a vote equal to the states that do not.

Iran remains the clearest case of the category error. After the death of Mahsa Amini in 2022 and the “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising, Tehran hanged and shot protesters, blinded women with pellets, and called the crackdown a defense of public morals. The same government has chaired UN social forums and sat in rooms that lecture democracies on discrimination. Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Qatar cycle through human-rights bodies while blasphemy laws, guardianship systems, and the punishment of unapproved belief remain features of the domestic order. The issue is not that these states have interests. It is that a system built on their consent cannot reliably tell the difference between a right and a regime talking point.

Cuba, Venezuela, Eritrea, and Nicaragua complete the set: governments that jail teenagers, starve opponents, or close churches, then arrive in Geneva to speak of solidarity and social rights.

Two universalisms, one inheritance squandered

The book’s intellectual spine is the distinction most contemporary human-rights talk erases. There is the universalism of nature—Locke, Montesquieu, Adams, Burke—and the universalism of institution, a line that runs through Rousseau and Kant toward the postwar settlement. The first is skeptical of supranational authority. The second dreams of moral unity achieved through law and administration.

Rhodes traces the second line from ancient roots through Christendom’s vision of a single moral order, through early-modern attempts at a law of nations, to 1948 and the later dogma that all “rights” are equal and interdependent. The Universal Declaration mixed authentic freedom rights with claims on the state for material provision. Later conferences declared them indivisible. The effect was not to elevate the poor. It was to relativize liberty. If everything is a human right, nothing is.

If everything is a human right, nothing is.

China understood this earlier than many Western diplomats. Elevate “the right to development,” “win-win cooperation,” and sovereignty, and the right not to be disappeared becomes negotiable. Russia understood that “anti-fascism” can be made to mean whatever the Foreign Ministry needs it to mean. Islamist governments understood that “Islamophobia” and “defamation of religion” can be used to police speech and belief far beyond their borders. The West supplied the vocabulary. They supplied the votes.

The West supplied the vocabulary. They supplied the votes.

A government that fails to feed its people has failed politically. A government that jails a pastor, dissolves a church by administrative fiat, interns a million people on the basis of ethnicity and faith, hunts Falun Gong for a generation, or liquidates Memorial has violated something prior to politics. Conflating the two lets the second crime hide behind the first.

Human rights advocacy needs to free itself from the inevitable corruption of institutionalized universalism.

A witness, not a spectator

FOREF’s work has always insisted that religious freedom is not a boutique concern. It is the canary in the coal mine of the entire human-rights order. When courts and commissions prefer a vague ideal

of social harmony to the right to manifest belief, they have already chosen which kind of universalism they serve.

Rhodes writes from that front. He has seen Helsinki principles used as leverage against Soviet power—and seen the same vocabulary later emptied by inflation and politicization. He has seen religious communities treated as security problems rather than as bearers of conscience. He has argued that human-rights defenders must remain independent of political blocs; that the community of rights is not identical with the community of states.

That independence is the book’s authority. If America and Europe still believe that human beings are endowed with unalienable rights, they should say so plainly, support those who suffer for that belief, and stop treating multilateral process as a substitute for moral clarity.

What has been forfeited

The force of the book is the force of forfeiture. A civilization that discovered, at great cost, that the individual is not the property of the city, the church, or the party handed the language of that discovery to a system that cannot distinguish a dissident from a development target.

People of faith feel this first. When “human rights” become a catalogue of policy outcomes, freedom of religion is demoted to one interest among others. The Uyghur in a re-education camp, the Falun Gong practitioner tortured for refusing to recant, the underground Catholic bishop who will not join the Patriotic Association, the Tibetan child boarded away from language and monastery, the Russian historian who kept the names of Stalin’s victims, the Iranian woman who refused the veil, the Jew murdered on 7 October, the Christian or Baha’i or Ahmadi treated as a security file: they become problems to be managed rather than persons to be protected.

They become problems to be managed rather than persons to be protected.

A society that cannot say, without embarrassment, that some things are owed to every human being *before* any committee meets will not remain free for long. It will negotiate its own soul in the name of universality.

Rhodes does not offer a cheap restoration. He offers a harder one: recover the older understanding of rights as inherent; accept that protection happens in political communities with real authority; project freedom as a principle rather than a deal. That is not isolationism. It is the condition of honest solidarity with the persecuted.

Some things are owed to every human being before any committee meets.

Why this book, why now

Human Rights Without Illusions is concentrated argument, not a memoir and not a manifesto. It will not flatter the professional human-rights class. It will not comfort those who think more treaties and more seats at more tables will redeem a category error. It will repay anyone who still cares whether the words “human rights” mean anything when the next church is dissolved, the next dissident is disappeared, or the next council equates the jailer with the jailed.

Read it as the deepening of Rhodes’s earlier *The Debasement of Human Rights* (2018), which showed how economic and social “rights” sabotaged the ideal of freedom. This volume goes further into the

philosophical trap: why we keep building institutions that require us to pretend Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and the Islamic Republic are partners in a common moral project.

Then do what the book implies. Defend actual persons. Name actual violations. Count the resolutions. Notice who sits on the Council. Refuse to trade the first freedom for a seat at a table that was never designed to protect it.

Recover, without illusion, the only universalism that does not devour its own children: the one that begins with human nature, not with a vote.

Aaron Rhodes has earned the right to say this. The rest of us have an obligation to hear it.

Related Links

***Human Rights Without Illusions: Escaping the Moral Trap of Universalism* is available from
Academica Press and major booksellers.**

The book

- **Academica Press:** www.academicapress.com/node/699
- **Amazon:** www.amazon.com/Human-Rights-Without-Illusions-Universalism/dp/1680533517
- **Bookshop.org:** bookshop.org/p/books/human-rights-without-illusions-escaping-the-moral-trap-of-universalism-aaron-rhodes/1a74b7d5277abale
- **Publisher notice / blurb:** hrwf.eu/world-human-rights-without-illusions/

Aaron Rhodes

- **Selected writings:** natural-rights.com/selected-publications/
- **Foreign Policy: “On Defending Human Rights, America Returns to First Principles”:** foreignpolicy.com/author/aaron-rhodes/
- **IRD / Mark Tooley conversation:** juicyecumenism.com/2026/02/26/human-rights-without-illusions/
- **Earlier book, *The Debasement of Human Rights*: Encounter Books listing / reviews (Kirk Center):**
kirkcenter.org/reviews/the-religion-of-human-rights/

FOREF

- **About FOREF Europe:** foref-europe.org/about/
- **Rhodes in Geneva on religious freedom:** foref-europe.org/blog/2024/10/09/geneva-dr-aaron-rhodes-addresses-the-global-crisis-of-religious-freedom/

UN system — membership, votes, double standards

- **HRC current members:** www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/hrc/current-members
- **UN Watch (resolutions database / commentary):** unwatch.org/
- **Hillel Neuer / UN Watch on GA resolution counts:** [search UN Watch Database](#)
- **Russia suspended from HRC (7 April 2022):** www.reuters.com/world/un-vote-suspending-russia-human-rights-council-over-ukraine-2022-04-07/

China — Xinjiang, Falun Gong, Catholics, Tibet

- **OHCHR Xinjiang assessment (31 Aug 2022):** [search “OHCHR Assessment Xinjiang 2022” on ohchr.org](#)

- **Amnesty on the failed Xinjiang debate vote:** www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/china-xinjiang-vote-failure-betrays-core-mission-of-un-human-rights-council/
- **USCIRF China:** www.uscifr.gov/
- **CECC (U.S. Congressional-Executive Commission on China):** www.cecc.gov/
- **Human Rights Watch on pressure on underground Catholics:** www.hrw.org/news/2026/04/15/china-pressure-on-catholics-escalates
- **Hudson Institute, Nina Shea, *Ten Persecuted Catholic Bishops in China*:** www.hudson.org/human-rights/ten-persecuted-catholic-bishops-china-nina-shea
- **UN experts / reporting on Tibetan boarding schools:** www.rfa.org/english/news/tibet/tibet-china-boarding-schools-07192024125737.html
- **Falun Dafa Information Center:** faluninfo.net/

#HumanRightsWithoutIllusions #AaronRhodes #FOREF #NaturalRights #ReligiousFreedom #FoRB

If you value my independent work on religious freedom, media ethics, and press freedom, every contribution makes a real difference.

If you appreciated this piece, feel free to buy me a coffee ☕

Buy me a coffee ☕

This Substack is reader-supported. To receive new posts and support my work, consider becoming a free or paid subscriber.

Upgrade to paid

You're currently a free subscriber to [Peter Zoehrer](#). For the full experience, [upgrade your subscription](#).

Upgrade to paid

♡ LIKE 💬 COMMENT ↻ RESTACK