

Islam, Democracy, and Human Rights

*Shirin Ebadi's Lecture at the University of Maryland
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President Mote, Provost Destler, distinguished faculty members, dear colleagues, dear students, distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen:

It is a pleasure to be here and have the opportunity to address in this forum, the statement I would like to make. This is an opportunity to address before the kind of Americans whose support for international peace and democratic norms is a source of inspiration for human rights activists throughout the world. I wish to express my deep gratitude for being invited here and declare in no uncertain terms that the honor you have bestowed upon me personally must be seen as a way of honoring all those who work for the cause of peace and human rights in a part of the world where such struggles involve the risk of losing one's freedom, and even one's life.

I am also delighted to be among you at the University of Maryland at this particular time, as I hear that your University stands at the threshold of establishing a Persian Studies Center headed by Dr. Karimi-Hakkak, and I would like to commend the University of Maryland for succeeding to bring one of Iran's best professors and intellectuals into your group. I hope that in the very near future, too, other centers will be established that would make this university a twenty-first century hub of educational and research activities that brings the cultures and religious traditions of the world closer together. Universities are a venue for dialogue and the frank exchange of various opinions. Thus, I seek your permission today to address one of the key questions of our era, the relationship between religion and democracy.

As you are well aware, since time immemorial, philosophers and thinkers have debated the relationship between religion and democracy. Some have maintained that since God created human beings, we all have certain duties to fulfill. They argue that humans have no “rights” vis-à-vis God, only “duties.” They acknowledge “rights” in their discourse, but as existing only toward other human beings and based on divine rules. According to this perspective, the majority opinion of the people cannot be the source of any rights or duties, since the majority is capable of making mistakes. Hence, they argue, God sent his prophets to correct the wrong doings of the people and guide them to the righteous path. Once a society is engulfed in deceit and oppression, a messenger is sent to correct the wrongdoing majority. Followers of this viewpoint do not tolerate any opinions divergent from their own and end up envisioning the world through the eyes of our predecessors, insisting all along that our contemporary problems may be solved by using the intellect of the yesteryears. This group does not concede that people’s elected representatives and their parliaments have the right to legislate. In their minds, the legitimacy of a parliament is limited merely to rendering divine rules into civic laws. Period. In other words, the parliament does not have the right to legislate independently of divine ordinances.

A few centuries ago the European Renaissance lessened this perceived incompatibility between democracy and religion, while continually strengthening democracy. Yet in the Eastern world and in Muslim countries, in particular, the thorny relationship between religion and democracy has not been resolved, and has indeed become the source of numerous conflicts. The current lack of democracy in most Muslim countries derives in part from this mindset contending that Islam is incompatible with

democracy and human rights. Obviously, this “Islam” is only what the state defines it to be, i.e., its own ideology, completely discarding the interpretations of other Muslims as to what constitutes *Shari`a* (or divine law). In reality, what we have ended up with in these countries is “state religion” rather than a “religious state.” These guardians of state religion brand whoever opposes them as an infidel or enemy of Islam. Using this rather convenient ploy, they force their political opponents into silence, robbing ordinary people of their spirit to resist. After all, people are more willing to fight mortal rulers than to differ with the religion of their ancestors.

In contrast to these governments, Islamic reformers and religious intellectuals, regardless of their nationality or the political boundaries superimposed on them, are a potential united front. The formation of this multinational coalition, backed by valid jurisprudential interpretation, seeking guidance from the spirit of the holy Quran, and resolving to resist oppressive regimes heralds the emancipation of Muslims. This united front has no name, no leader, no central headquarters or branches, and yet it is ingrained in the minds of enlightened Muslims, who while safeguarding their ancestral faith, also happen to respect democracy, do not tolerate rule by force, and refuse to follow the misguided proclamations of religious authorities.

Islam, in its essence, is a religion of equality. The designation of Billal, an Ethiopian Black man, as the first muezzin (one who calls people to prayer) by the Prophet is an indicator of this equality. The Prophet Muhammad used to say that the elite of his own tribe has no priority over Billal. After his triumphant return to Mecca, the Prophet Muhammad established an Islamic state and ruled as the political leader and lawgiver for a number of years. He asked both Muslims and non-Muslims to swear allegiance to the

new faith, a practice akin to voting in our present day and age. Some people did not swear allegiance but managed to live freely within the boundaries of the Islamic world. The Prophet used to kiss the hands of his daughter and call her by the most subtle and sublime adjective of his own time, as the flower of his heart. In light of these practices, how can one today justify belittling women in such a religion or privileging some segment of the population over others? More importantly, how can one negate cultural pluralism and declare emphatically that democracy is incompatible with Islam?

In reality, the main problem should not be attributed to the essence of Islam, but rather to the unwillingness for numerous reasons of Islamic states to embrace an interpretation of Islam that is compatible with human rights, preserves individual and social freedoms, and advocates democratic statecraft and government. For these reasons, the dominant culture in Muslim societies, including political culture, is in need of an overhaul, a reform—in order to empower people to understand social realities with open eyes, and to write laws that are both compatible with the spirit of Islam and, at the same time, address the needs of our time and era.

The most important step for this cultural evolution is to teach the fundamentals and foundations of Islamic faith correctly. Muslims need to learn the real Islam and to recognize that remaining Muslim and living better lives are both possible. We need to learn that we can remain Muslims while embracing the principles of human rights and democracy, and more significantly, while implementing them.

If such education were to become prevalent among Muslims, the custodians of religious states would be compelled to respect the rights of their own people and would be prevented from imposing their personal beliefs on the masses while calling it divine

order. We are now witnessing how a number of Islamic governments silence any idea they do not like, branding any criticism against them as “apostasy” and “opposition to Islam.” These governments regard themselves as God’s representatives on earth. Naturally, then, any criticism of their actions or beliefs is mislabeled a critique of Islam per se. This is a rather convenient excuse to silence both freedom seekers and intimidate Muslims—accusing them of not having firm religious convictions and being shaky in matters of faith. In this context, freedom-seeking Muslims, who only criticize the wrongdoings of their rulers, suddenly find themselves caught in a web of accusations, fearing the charge of apostasy, and thus refraining from any type of protest.

Alas, authoritarian regimes manage to hide behind the shield of Islam and continue to oppress their citizens. Muslim intellectuals should try to connect with the Muslim masses, through any means and methods available, and familiarize people with the dynamic spirit of Islam. These intellectuals should subsequently compare the actions of their governments with the edicts of this dynamic Islam and articulate a political critique that will resonate with the large number of Muslims. We should bear in mind that criticizing the policies of self-proclaimed Islamic states will not be effective and will not resonate with the majority of the public unless the critics can point out how actions of a ruling elite has deviated from or violated the core foundations of Islam.

We need to make Muslims aware that Islamic states, or for that matter Islamic groups, do not have the key to paradise, and that taking action in the name of Islam does not necessarily make that act “Islamic.” Only when this mode of thinking becomes prevalent will we see the emergence of moderate Islamic movements rather than terrorist organizations. This seems to be the solution for more than a billion Muslims, one-sixth of

the world's population, who are simultaneously interested in safeguarding their faith as well as being worthy of living in better conditions.

On the other hand, there are those who seek to pursue their group interest through the frames of war. They seek to theorize war by touching on the weakness of an individual or group and falsely associating it with Islam. They state that Eastern civilization, and specifically Western civilization, is inherently incompatible with Eastern civilization. They associate the wrong deeds and actions of one individual or a few Muslims to Islam as a religion, so that they may prove easier that Islam is incompatible with their Western civilization.

Islam is not a religion of terror or violence. We must know that if a person is killed in the name of Islam, then Islam is taken advantage of. The wrong deeds of one individual or a group cannot be attached to Islam, and cannot remain on the history and record of Islam.

We, too, refuse to attach to Christianity the wrongful actions of a group during the war in Bosnia. Christ is the messenger of God and the messenger of peace and justice. We do not ascribe to Judaism the Israeli government's defiance of numerous U.N. resolutions and the events of the region of the world where it lies. Moses was chosen by God, and a messenger of the right to justice. We must separate the mistakes of men from their religion and civilization. Civilizations not only do not clash but have many commonalities. Let us speak of these commonalities and not of divergences and differences. Let us not justify war, for no one shall emerge victorious from war.

And let us remember that democracy is neither an event that could occur overnight nor a gift to be handed to people on a silver platter. Democracy comes about

through a historical process that will have to emerge and evolve. For a country with a claim to support the cause of democracy to liberate a country suffering from despotism, moral support for freedom-seeking activists and democratic institutions is the only way. Only in this way is it possible to nurture democracy and allow it blossom forth and bear fruit.

Military attacks, even when undertaken with the intention of establishing democracy and human rights, not only harm the cause of democracy but also perpetuate the cycle of violence. It is neither reasonable nor acceptable at the dawn of the twenty-first century for one country to chart a specific future for another. Let us not forget that we cannot make a people happy by force. We cannot export democracy using lethal weaponry, nor can we drop human rights over a people's head together with napalm bombs.

Democracy and human rights cannot be implemented and established without the will and aspirations of a country's citizens. Countries claiming to support human rights must begin through education and negotiations, and advance their efforts through the United Nations in order to compel aggressor nations to observe human rights. And if there is punishment to be doled out that too ought to be carried out through the United Nations. Only then will the struggle for democracy and freedom be seen as legitimate and defensible.

The news reaching us from Iraq is indeed sorrowful. I am extremely sorry that American soldiers, your children, are being killed in Iraq. Iraqi prisoners, too, are regrettably treated shamefully. Violence is contagious.

When I was a student, our professors told us that the world legalists, philosophers, and intellectuals have gathered to draft a universal declaration for human rights. We were told that this endeavor would not have been possible were it not for the sustained effort of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. This woman is truly the Mother of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Today it is with great regret that we see that her children—that is to say the current statesmen in the United States—have resorted to actions that have undermined her efforts. They must seek forgiveness for their wrongful action from the spirit of this woman.

When I entered your city today, this town, I was discussing the tragic events of September 11 with Professor Karimi-Hakkak. He was telling me that it would indeed be so good if we were able to build a school in Afghanistan for every person who died, was killed, in that event. For only through such action can the ignorance, which is the cause of these shameful acts, be eradicated. Herein lies the difference between a university person and a statesman. I honestly wish that statesmen and politicians could exchange their positions with the university professors, just for one week a year. And if that were to happen, we would live in a better world.

Democracy and human rights are the common needs of all cultures and societies. Respecting life, property, and human dignity is praiseworthy in all cultures and religions. By the same token, terror, violence, torture, and humiliation of human beings is considered unbecoming in any society or religion. Those who, in the name of cultural relativism, refrain from implementing democracy and human rights are reactionary tyrants who disguise their dictatorial nature behind a cultural mask to violate the rights of

their citizens in the name of national interest. The world will achieve peace only when the enforcement of human rights becomes universal.

Whether we like it or not, the general phenomenon of globalization has globalized war and peace. Without being involved in the war, you wake up one day and see that its consequences have engulfed you. As such, if we desire a peaceful world, we have to struggle for it, both in our own countries and elsewhere. We have to encourage the development of global perspectives and broaden our concern for peace and human rights beyond the borders of our own societies. You who live in America cannot remain indifferent to violations of human rights in Afghanistan, Iraq, in Palestine, Iran, or in other parts of the world. We are all on the same boat and we all sail toward a greater civilization. Any damage to any part of the vessel will disrupt or hinder its movement. The fate of humanity is so intertwined that one can no longer consider the blessings of this world one's own and deprive others of them at the same time. Globalization would be a positive historical development only if it can increase the prospects for international peace and reduce poverty and inequality in the world. We need the kind of globalization that paves the way for the creation of a transnational and international check on the abuse of national power and exploitation of labor.

I sound like a dreamer, I know. I am a dreamer when, in the midst of the turmoil in the Islamic world, I dream and I imagine a dynamic Islam that not only is entirely compatible with democracy and human rights, but can be made to carry the banner of advancing these causes throughout the world. I am a dreamer when I see a globalized humanity of the heart where every human being feels the pain of the other as if it were his or her own. And yes, I am a dreamer when I think dreams are—have always been—a

crucial part of the human history. The challenge facing us today is to think like dreamers but act in a pragmatic manner. And let us remember that many of humanity's accomplishments began as a dream. Thank you.