

"Religion and the Promotion of Democracy"

Speech by former President Mohammad Khatami of Iran at St Antony's College, Oxford, on 3 November 2006.

In the Name of God

In universities, particularly one like Oxford, which revels in traditional scientific approaches as much as it does in modern sciences, I liked very much and still do to "hear" more than I "say". Therefore, let me raise an issue only just as an opening gambit: Which notions and thoughts in our world have enhanced democracy and which notions and thinkers have undermined it?

In order to answer this question, I will have to review another subject initially.

1. I have discussed about secularism previously. We can presume various general non-historical concepts for secularism and associate those concepts with all places and times. But it is obviously a big mistake to make non-historical something, which is essentially historical. Secularism is the experience of Western civilization and culture. We all know more or less why this is ascribed to the West. Insistence that secularism be spread to places, where a historical background for that is bereft and political, social and religious incentives are lacking, is a terribly glaring blunder in the first place, even before a discussion is made as to attractiveness or unattractiveness of the subject.

Secularism, which is indeed in opposition to Christian theocracy principally, is also its effect. But an effect that stands in opposition to its cause. Opposition of the effect to the cause is quite common in politics and social developments.

Dialog over such issues in our world is inevitable and a dialog between Islam and the West is obviously a necessity in that respect. What I mean by Islam is both the Islamic faith and the Islamic world and civilization. West, too, consists of Christian faith and Christian world and secularism. Of course the secularized Western community is a significant component of the Western identity but reduction of the West to this component makes us face hurdles that postpone the timely materialization of the Islam-West dialog.

By materialization of the dialog, I mean reaching clear social and political conclusions – conclusions that can prevent violence, war and bloodshed. If such conclusions were reached, detailed philosophical, verbal and sociological discussions can be pursued without any reservations.

2. I would like to shift to the issue of democracy now and that how it can be enhanced, and under what circumstances, in the light of faith.

We had better think of exploring ways of promoting democracy today.

In order to respond to this question, I stress the need for clarification of the relationship between religion and democracy as well as demarcations of the latter with secularism.

Some classic texts on secularism, emphasize that religion should be limited to private life, practically placing religion in front of the modern society and democracy. This conviction, which is not in agreement with many of the West's experiences, has brought about unpleasant consequences in the non-Western world, particularly in the Islamic world.

Today, the claim that the experiment of some Western countries with democratization is starkly different from some classic theories is not unworthy. Contrary to what some philosophers in the enlightenment age hold, the modern age has not only not been based on the ashes of the Middle Ages, but according to Russel's popular saying, the achievements of the modern age have been on the shoulders of giants that were formed in the Middle Ages. "Individualism" and "Western wisdom" – two big legacies of the modern age – indeed have their roots in religious teachings.

The 20th century marked the West's departure from its perception of the Middle Ages. Therefore, democracy and other practices of the modern age would not have been likely without historical experiences and without religion playing a role in preparing the grounds for such experiences. Religion has contributed to the survival of the modern age experience and democracy as much as it contributed to its creation.

However, inappropriate insistence in non-Western countries, particularly in the world of Islam, that religion and democracy are incompatible has been detrimental to the Islamic world's companionship with modernism and has mainly provoked the emergence of extremist traditionalism and religious extremism.

Whether we want it or not, the modern age and democracy have been a new phenomenon and commodity for the Islamic world. Islamic culture and tradition, like any other original human custom, has had the potential to keep pace with this new commodity, while preserving its own identity and substance.

With a little contemplation, we can realize the truth that the less the West has used a language of insult, slander and border-crossing criticism in its approach and attitude toward the Islamic communities, the more new opportunities have been created for the Islamic tradition to

regenerate and for its dormant capacities and talents to blossom – without religion having to lose its identity and true sense.

The extent to which religious modernists and intellectuals in various Islamic countries can be successful largely depends on the moderateness or harshness of the tone modern civilizational phenomena pick up in addressing the heirs to tradition.

Wherever the modern Western civilization has been represented by speakers, who assert that progress and development are conditioned on fighting the Islamic legacy and that Islam is a major hurdle that stalls democracy and the new civilization, the world of Islam has found it extremely difficult to embrace modern age. The very assertion also sows the seeds of resistance against modernity in the form of extremism and fundamentalism.

On the other hand, the more compatible the language in which the new civilizational commodities are presented and the more it is performed by those who are intent on safeguarding the religious values, the more such commodities and new phenomena such as democracy become incorporated with dormant talents in the Islamic world and thought.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the issue is not merely limited to tone and linguistic structure. One of the main factors that lead to resistance, extremism and violence taking shape in the Islamic world is the approach and performance of the carriers and agents of civilization, who are also approved by the West.

From the viewpoint of a significant proportion of the world of Islam, West's image is painted as one that unilaterally supports bullying and despotic regional powers, engages in oppressive wars, defends dictatorial regimes, and backs occupation of lands and humiliation and repression of the inhabitants of those lands. The image painted of the carriers of democracy has stripped democracy of its supreme ethical and human values in parts of the world. This genuine subject should be looked at from a different perspective.

One likely suggestion about the dialog between Islam and the West, especially dialog between great religions, is that discussions start on "global ethics". Naturally, this topic will not merely be limited to well-known topics in the area of philosophy. What should be discussed is how we can find a way that leads to ethical rulings that are lucid, implementable and binding. Ethical rulings under which big and small powers of the world are obligated to heed basic human rights and respect and dignify all members of the human community.

Should this happen, we will be able to discuss issues that will enable us to take little but solid and promising steps toward streamlining the political, economic and social conditions of the

oppressed people of the world and expanding security in all countries, rather than issues that will have no bearing on the lives of a good number of people, even if they are free of theoretical and philosophical deficiencies.

Democracy needs to be buttressed by ethics, even in the Western community. Western theoreticians and philosophers have presented different explanations in defence of democracy from an ethical perspective. This has also been attached great significant in the Islamic countries.

Let me speak of my own experience in Iran and the world of Islam and tell you that in order for democracy to have an ethical platform in Islamic countries, it should enjoy two grounds:

First, we need to differentiate between democratic system and how it emerges and is presented in the behavior of a certain number of Western countries, just as the Western countries need to differentiate between Islam and the way it is presented in a significant part of the Islamic world. The West should believe that Islam, regardless of its sacred principles, is one of humans' greatest civilizational heritages, which has been based on the common sense and experience to safeguard the rights of people.

Meanwhile, the Islamic world should accept that the Western civilization is the latest experimental and judicious achievement humans made, which, irrespective of the dominating Western powers, has a large number of triumphs. An atmosphere of slander and insults darken the prospects for dialog. Such an atmosphere should be eschewed as far as possible.

Second, backing any epistemological system up ethically is only likely through relying on cultural and historical heritages. Based on this, in order for democracy to take roots in the Islamic world, it needs to borrow the nobility that results from Islamic values. In the West too, modern age was cultivated based on moral principles of Christian teachings.

And finally, new solutions should be sought, not only in the world of Islam but also in every nook and crony of the world, to isolate violence and eliminate the conditions of despotism, expansionism and self-centeredness.

Promotion of dialog, everywhere, at every level and over every chronic or acute problem facing humans can reach a new solution. Let us make an effort to make dialog over serious issues in the real world more optimal and possible.

End Item